

An integrative perspective on the value of a bachelors degree:

*Comparisons of students' views,
financial returns and policy frames
in Norway and England*

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“How one conceives of education, we have finally come to recognize, is a function of how one conceives of the culture and its aims, professed and otherwise”

Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, (1996: ix-x).

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Abstract

Against the background of converging European HE systems, this thesis takes a comparative perspective on the value of a degree. It explores how undergraduate students construct and understand the value of their degree and how far these views relate to wider national constructions of value found in policy and in financial returns to education. The study used a mixed research model, triangulating between various sources and methods. Discussion groups were conducted with a total of 27 first-year bachelors degree students, in London at University College London and in Oslo at the University of Oslo; half were studying Biology and half Economics. A comparative review of policy is also set out, drawing on recent, comparative sources, particularly work by Kogan et al. (2006). The measurable value of a degree is investigated through a comparison of OECD rate of return measures (2008, 2009). This study draws on Ritzer's integrative theory of social analysis, assuming that national constructions of degree value draw on macro level factors (HE policy and economic data) and micro level factors (students' views), and that these include objective and subjective factors (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004). It employs a narrative approach to analysis and a theoretically generated framework of key narratives about the value of higher education aid national comparisons and support links between aspects of value.

Students' discussions reveal a common set of expectations about a degree: benefits in access to higher status, more interesting work are vital; the overall university experience is widely discussed; and, increased knowledge about their subject or gaining transferable skills are important to many. However, subject groups and national groups suggest differences in how these benefits are understood and prioritised. English students demonstrate a narrower, more instrumental idea of degree value, focused on establishing security and a competitive advantage in finding work. Improved job opportunities are also vital to Norwegian students but as part of a broader sense of value where self-development and interest in their subject, are emphasised. These differences reflect national policy priorities and approaches. The role of financial measures in shaping students' views and policy is shown to be important but problematic, as this comparison suggests such measures offer a limited perspective to explaining differences in national systems. The findings also raise important questions about the direction of change in each national system, particularly the potential impact of changes in graduate employment patterns and wage premiums on the social role of higher education.

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1 Introduction and background

This chapter introduces the reasons for the choice of this topic and rationale for this study. Key background issues that influence the value of a degree to the individual, and higher education (HE) to society, are set out for both countries.

1.1 Rationale

There are two main points that provide the rationale for this topic. Firstly, a classic comparative question is to ask how far, and in what ways, national differences persist underneath broad convergence or commonalities in education. Comparative research sheds light on issues that have become invisible or taken for granted, in this case assumptions that; modern, mass HE systems have converged on a similar model; that the value of a university education can be measured and compared using simple economic estimates; and, that therefore the value of degrees in European societies is constructed and understood along similar lines. The European HE landscape is doubtless characterised by convergence, through formal agreements such as Bologna and common pressures to develop internationally-oriented HE systems to support new knowledge economies. Comparison can illuminate how such international trends are mediated and transformed in differing national contexts. Furthermore, while the effects of convergence are widely considered in terms of macro features such as governance and structural changes, less is known about how and if these processes filter down to lead to more similar views amongst students in different countries.

This subject is also timely. In the last two years long-established ideas about desirability of further HE expansion, knowledge economies and growth and funding for HE have come under strain due to ongoing economic problems effecting many countries, particularly within Europe. These strains on national economies will inevitably have implications for HE systems, and indeed the impact is already becoming visible in reduced HE budgets in some countries, including the UK (Eurydice, 2010). After a relatively long and stable period of growth and prosperity, where HE expansion was widely accepted as an important and worthwhile investment, the costs of mass HE systems may come under renewed scrutiny. Questions such as ‘what benefits does HE offer?’ and ‘how much is a degree really worth?’ will likely become more pressing, both for prospective students and national governments.

1.2 Problem statement, research questions and overview of approach

The study aims to investigate a complex issue, the value of a degree, in a comparative fashion. The assumptions and key focus can be summarised as core problem statement:

How do students in different countries construct and understand the value of their degree and how far are their views in line with, or in tension with, wider perspectives on value both in terms of policy trends and emphasis and the measureable returns to education?

It will consider the value of a degree on three levels:

- The measurable economic value of a degree as measured by the Rate of Return (RoR) to degree level studies, and other measures of HE benefits such as rates of employment or wages.
- The value of a degree as constructed through policy rhetoric and funding approaches.
- The perceived value of a degree amongst students in terms of expected benefits.

To investigate the problem statement across these three levels, a number of sub-questions will need to be answered in each strand:

- How does the economic value of a degree between the two countries differ and what could explain this?
- How do recent policy trends illustrate national differences or convergence and how has the national construction of value changed over time?
- How do students understand and perceive the value of their degree and the importance and role of HE?

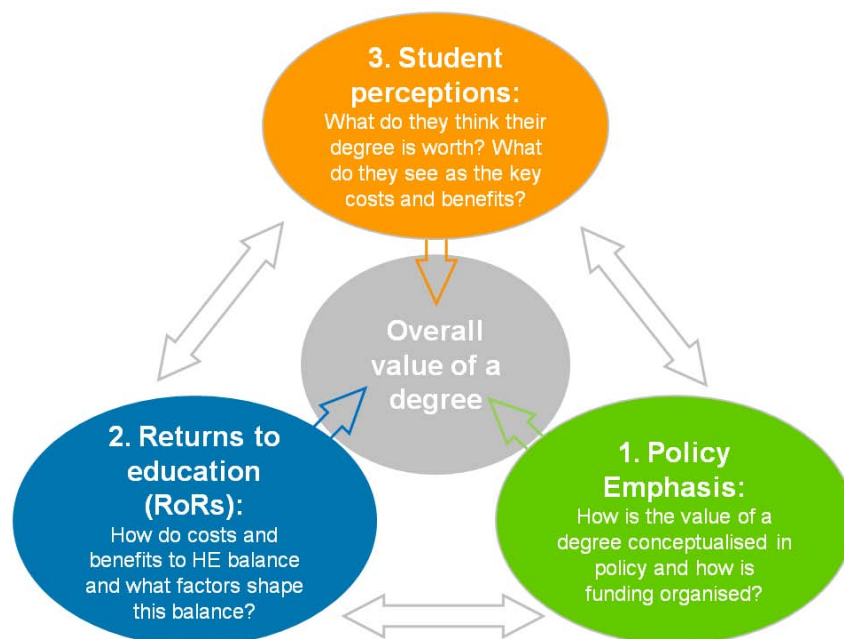
During analysis the over-arching questions to be addressed will be:

- Is there evidence that students' views are influenced by economic measures of value and policy trends in their home country?

- Do the different constructions of value (from each strand) fit together? Are they mutually supporting or are they in tension?
- What are the overall similarities and contrasts between these two countries in how degree and HE value is constructed?

The structure for this project addresses these research questions through three strands of research. Each strand will be investigated in turn and then brought together to draw out interactions or links and provide a rich analysis of the value of a degree in each nation. In this way, a sophisticated picture of national differences and similarities will be provided and the relationships between these levels or perspectives can be considered. A hypothesis is put forward that the two countries will demonstrate quite different systems of value, where policies, perceptions and outcomes are inter-linked and related, constructing quite different ideas about the value of HE which are mutually reinforcing within their own context.

Figure 1: Overview of the three research strands



1.2.1 Delimitations

As the previous model shows, the study is ambitious. It brings together several different perspectives on value, draws on multiple data sources and seeks to make a comparative analysis across all of these levels. The concept of value in HE potentially involves an

extremely broad and varied set of institutional traditions, roles and aims. HE is not a neatly defined area, and is often seen as equivalent to tertiary education which includes vocational and professional training. National systems for tertiary education involve substantial variations and due to this UNESCO established a set of international standards and classifications (ISCED standards) for clarity and comparison. This study will therefore focus on bachelors degrees (undergraduate degrees) taught at universities, as these involve a level and type of HE that is quite clearly defined, characterised by fairly standard structures and which occupies a similar position in both target countries' tertiary education systems. A bachelors degree in both Norway and the UK falls under the ISCED category of 'tertiary-type A programmes' which are typically provided through universities and are "largely theory-based and are designed to provide sufficient qualifications for entry to advanced research programmes and professions with high skill requirements"¹. Throughout this study, HE will be used to refer to university-based education. This narrows the focus considerably and avoids unfair comparisons between much more variable systems for vocational training and professional training.

A second point of clarification is that this study focuses specifically on English (not UK) HE as far as possible. The UK includes the regions of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales which have long take different approaches to HE. In particular, Scotland and Wales received new devolved powers in 1999 to direct their HE sectors and now organise funding for HE quite differently from England. The research with students was conducted in England and the policy discussion focuses on the English situation. However overall UK data and sources are also used, in particular the analysis of RoRs where England-specific data is unavailable. The majority of UK universities are based in England, making UK-wide data a reasonable proxy in understanding English trends, and it will be clarified throughout the report if sources refer to UK-wide, or England-specific issues.

1.3 Theoretical and ontological orientation

While figure 1 shows how aspects of value can be broken down and explored in different strands of research, the theoretical framework presented here suggests how these different

¹ See the OECD's online statistical glossary, summarising the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=5441>

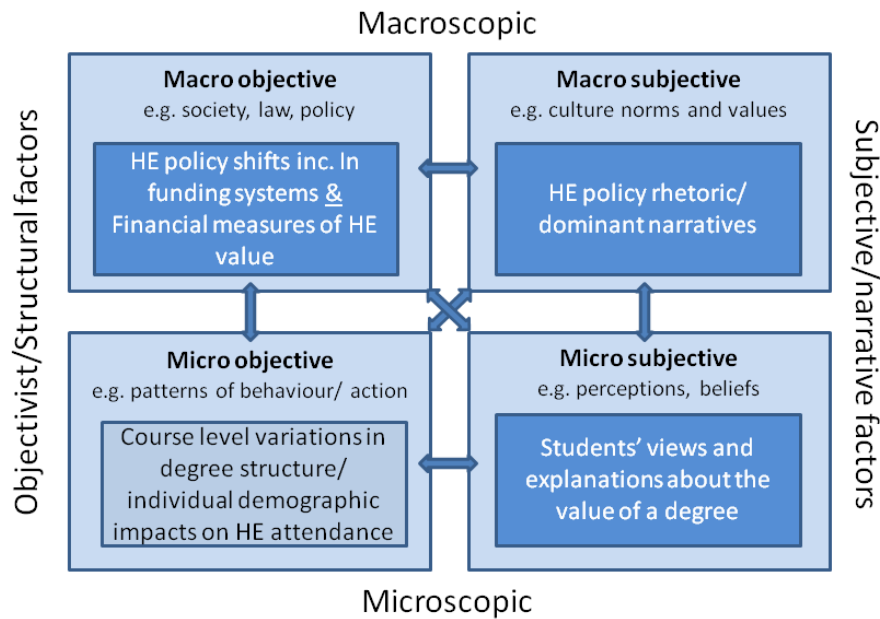
aspects interact to form national systems of value. Bringing together such diverse perspectives into one coherent analysis is challenging. The approach and methods adopted are largely based on integrative theory, while narrative approaches are used to analyse policy differences and data from discussions with students. A brief introduction to these perspectives is offered in this section, before going on to map the context and background for the project in more detail.

The approach used in this study largely falls in line with social constructivism: it considers value in terms of subjective or ‘soft’ features of norms and ideas. However, it also deliberately draws in objective or ‘harder’ measures of value as well. The question of value requires a consideration of how people *perceive* HE to be valuable and how HE creates quite concrete, valuable impacts for individuals and societies. A constructionist orientation favours certain assumptions, and it is important to make these explicit; first, it is assumed that larger sets of ideas, norms, established categories or narratives frame and influence worldviews and interpretations; second, it is assumed that phenomena are best understood when placed in context, and without this a great deal of meaning is lost (Guba & Lincoln, as cited in Patton, 2002). However, there are clearly important institutional and systemic features of HE which can be examined more objectively: events or structures, including funding systems, policies and institutions, can all be measured and assessed fairly consistently, for example by comparing data on public and private HE spending or analysis of overall costs and benefits (see sections 4 & 5). This study draws on such data, but also seeks to highlight that these measures, while popular, are just one of many valid perspectives on the value of HE.

1.3.1 An integrative model for investigating degree value

The study draws on objective and subjective perspectives on value, and assumes these are interlinked; it also draws on both micro perspectives (students’ individual views) and macro perspectives (national and international policies and trends). This range of perspectives and sources require a clear theoretical model which can draw these issues together and help to explore the links and interactions between them. Ritzer’s integrative model (1988, 2004) is well-suited to these needs (figure 2. In this model, examples are offered of factors at the micro-objective level, but these are not addressed in this study.)

Figure 2: Ritzer's integrative model adapted for value in higher education²



A few features of Ritzer's theory must be clarified, as they have implications for this study. The model forms four dimensions based on two axes, intended to represent continuums not dichotomies. The arrows show that these dimensions are assumed to relate to, and influence, one another, meaning the overall system is dynamic. Such a model aims at developing an analysis that is mutually enriching: all four dimensions are expected to make more sense seen in relation to others, leading to a better overall understanding of the phenomena investigated.

Implications of the theoretical foundation and an integrative model

Any such analytical model also builds in certain limitations and assumptions. In simplifying the relationship in this way, it is still possible dimensions that are important to the overall system are neglected. There is also a risk that a system may be dominated and determined largely by one factor, despite the assumption being all factors contribute to the overall outcomes. In attempting a broad analysis, such an approach will also tend to sacrifice some analytical depth within each dimension (see methods, 3.1). This theoretical foundation builds in certain assumptions, and has implications for how the research topic is approached and how conclusions are drawn. This theoretical perspective suggests that:

² Ritzer's original model used a micro/macro axis and objectivist/subjectivist axis. The boxes summarise how elements of this project fit the model. The micro-objectivist level is not addressed here, but features of degree value that might fit into this category are suggested.

Context matters: This theoretical framework assumes that to understand HE, context, and in this case, national difference matters. Universities and HE systems are seen not as isolated institutions but sub-systems of society. The structures and policies making up HE systems can be expected to be moulded by the wider social and political norms and ideologies.

Explaining the interaction between dimensions matters: A systems approach suggests national HE systems exist in a state of ongoing, incomplete reform. Instead of looking for linear relationships or one-way, causal links between factors, processes such as feedback, cyclical change, and relationships of balance or tension between many factors are considered. Changes in one area of a system may be minimised or reversed by changes from the others. Influence from one dimension on another may be direct and it may not be swift: a single policy change is unlikely to transform students' views, but persistent changes, or wider changes to different dimensions may lead to substantial change across the system.

Systems in tension suggest conflict or instability: HE systems are embedded in their wider political, social and cultural contexts, and it can be assumed that a high degree of congruence is desirable within a system, at least in terms of the direction of travel in each dimension. Where different elements of a system are conflicting or in tension, this may suggest conflict or instability in the HE system. In this case it is assumed that national educational aims, individual values and decisions and measureable impacts of HE should relate to one another in some coherent way.

The historical developments of HE systems are persistent influences: Cummings underlines that once they are established, social systems tend to be resilient, with 'subjective' ideas shaping systems and students in their own image. It is assumed that the traditions regarding universities and views on knowledge will be stubborn influences.

Ideology and politics matter: Education policies can be seen as a mix of subjective and objective elements (Ball, 2008). However, the more ideological elements of modern education systems are often concealed though they remain an important influence (Barnett, 2003). Ideology reflects and shapes the wider world: in education it helps to determine what is possible and desirable in HE, as well as what the ultimate aims and values of the system are (Ball, 2008). At the same time, an ideology is unlikely to gain traction if it runs entirely counter to the wider values of a system, or the objective structures and factors in place.

1.4 Research background: The European HE landscape

It is widely assumed that processes of globalisation, internationalisation, imitation and harmonisation policies have played a vital role in developing a ‘common fashion’ in HE within Europe. It has been observed that different national educational institutions are markedly more homogeneous than the societies and cultures they belong to and that globalisation and internationalization of education policy must be an important factor explaining this (March and Olsen, 1989, as cited in Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004). The development of new systems for international comparison and monitoring and trends in HE reform underline this sense of convergence of HE systems: Norway and England now have similar HE structures, qualifications systems, monitoring systems and credit systems (Kogan et al. 2006). While often discussed as part of the same broad trends, processes of convergence, internationalisation and globalisation are distinct. Convergence in education refers to both a process and a state: the steps of moving to more ‘alike’ systems and the assumption that systems are already quite alike; indeed the popularity of convergence as a concept has been attributed to its ambiguity in signalling a desire for more compatible systems, while upholding the value of diversity (Witte, 2006). Internationalisation in HE typically refers to processes of cooperation and movement of students and staff between national systems (Kubow & Fossum, 2007). Globalization is a highly contested concept (see below) but in HE tends to refer to processes which go beyond internationalisation and de-territorialise practices traditionally based within the nation state (Kubow & Fossum, 2007).

This discussion proceeds to set out key background on the European HE context, while making such distinctions clear: more concrete processes of convergence linked to the Bologna and Lisbon processes are outlined first; this leads into a summary of key international HE policy trends; finally, debates about the influence of globalisation on HE are discussed.

1.4.1 HE convergence: the Bologna process and Lisbon agenda

“Since the late 1990s the rate of change [in European HE] has accelerated to unprecedented levels, largely on the shoulders of two key developments: the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon strategy... A common path towards transparency, quality, growth, efficiency and excellence is regarded as a prerequisite for making Europe one of the strongest education and economic leaders in the world.” (De Boer & File, 2009:8)

In 1998 ministers from France, Germany, Italy and the UK signed the Sorbonne declaration, stating their commitment to "harmonising the architecture of the European Higher Education system"³. This led onto the bolder and broader Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999 by 29 European countries, including the UK and Norway, which aims to create a European higher education area, with the target of this year (2010) for meeting key aims including: comparable HE qualification structures with undergraduate (bachelors), and graduate (masters and doctorate) awards; compatible international credit systems; the promotion of mobility between systems; and, comparable processes for quality assurance⁴.

Importantly for this study, the aims and justifications for more compatible or interlinked European HE systems have shifted over time. The Bologna declaration stressed cultural common interests and that "a Europe of knowledge" would consolidate European identity with universities presented as an "irreplaceable factor for social and human growth". Economic, competitive rationales about the need to build "competences to face the challenges of the new millennium" also features in Bologna's aims and these have become dominant over time, partly due to the Lisbon process, established in 2000. Lisbon stated that Europe must "become the most competitive, and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" (European Council, 2000). A 2004 review of Lisbon underlined that the Bologna process must be aligned with, and support the Lisbon project, stressing that "...Europe has no option but to radically improve its knowledge economy and underlying economic performance if it is to respond to the challenges of Asia and the US" (Kok, 2004: 12). Such shifts in rationale and emphasis in international policies are important: Neave (2007) notes that such agreements have influence through agreements to amend processes and policy but that they also exert a normative influence on states. In this way Bologna and Lisbon have helped to embed a set of assumptions about HE's role in a context of globalisation, and its importance in developing knowledge economies.

Neave (2007) also point out that international policy statements are unreliable predictors of what is implemented in each state. It does seem that in the cases of England and Norway, the degree of influence of the Bologna process has varied, as has how it was translated and applied. Norway had to make much more substantial changes to HE structures, while many of the standard European features of qualification and grading structures were already in place in

³ The Sorbonne Declaration. Available at: http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Sorbonne_declaration.pdf

⁴ The Bologna Declaration. <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf>

England, and the details of how these changes were implemented vary substantially (see section 4). Witte (2006) argues that even these ambitious, concrete processes leave considerable room for national variation: Bologna stops short of convergence, instead focusing on greater comparability in HE architecture and leaving factors such as governance, management, funding and regulation of access relatively undisturbed.

1.4.2 International trends and fashions in HE

Kogan et al. (2006) suggest that imitation between OECD nations has played a vital role in developing a ‘common fashion’ in HE. These international trends have been supported by agreements such as Bologna and by international organisations such as the OECD and EU, who tend to draw on a common set of ideological assumptions about the state and HE. Three policy trends that are particularly relevant to this study are discussed below.

The rapid expansion of HE systems

The expansion and massification of HE has led to substantial shifts in how the value of HE is understood and the role it plays in nations. Higher education expanded rapidly in the years after WW2 in many countries and there are no signs of this coming to an end: HE entry rates in OECD countries increased from 37% in 1995 to 57% in 2008 (OECD, 2008a:13).

Graduation rates in Norway (43%) and the UK (39%) are both ahead of the OECD average (see appendix 2 for details of graduation and entry rates). Trow (1974, 2005) was one of the first to map out this expansion and analyse its significance. He described how elite systems, of small, closed institutions had shifted towards mass forms where up to half of relevant cohorts would take HE, and that eventually universal forms would see going to HE become the norm. Trow anticipated that such changes in scale would lead to fundamental changes in the value and function of HE: its primary function would shift from the formation of elites, to skills transmission and eventually to adapting the population in general to technological change. As HE expanded access to HE would no longer be seen a privilege based on birth or talent, but a right for all those with the right skills and eventually an obligation for many groups in society (see appendix 1 for summary of Trow’s phases). Expansion has been a driving factor of changes in Norway (Bleiklie, Hostaker & Vabo, 2000) and England, where a target to reach participation rates of 50% has been central to HE reforms (Seldon, 2008) and both national, mass systems demonstrate shifts in function and value reflecting Trow’s theory.

Moves towards cost-sharing

A second international trend is evident in the popularity of cost-sharing policies, typically involving the introduction of new charges or fees, or the removal of state support for students, but which covers any policy that shifts costs to non-state sources including students, parents or businesses (Johnstone, 2004). Johnstone (2004, 2007) argues that increased cost-sharing is inevitable, a view shared by many international bodies, including the OECD:

"This view [that tertiary education is solely a state responsibility], is gradually being replaced by the perception that, given the shared public and private returns that education brings, costs and responsibilities for its provision should also be shared between those who directly benefit and society at large." (OECD, 2008b:8)

Johnstone (2004) argues this trend is driven by ideological and practical factors. Expansions creates strains on public finances and makes any non-state funding attractive (Johnstone, 2004:403), a point that is particularly valid today in the ongoing financial crisis which has led to steep cuts in many European countries HE budgets (Eurydice, 2010). Measures of graduate earnings and cost-benefit analysis of HE (such as RoRs) have shown strong individual returns to HE and these figures have been widely used by bodies such as the OECD and European Council to argue for higher private contributions (Mora et al. 2007). Alongside these more practical pressures, Johnstone argues that more political or ideological arguments shape how cost-sharing is introduced. Means-tested student contributions, including high fees, can be argued to improve fairness, as state funded HE is disproportionately accessed by the better-off (Johnstone, 2004). Fees can also be presented as a way to foster efficiency and responsiveness by creating competition and market-like conditions. Both these arguments depend on ideological assumption and on the wider social context around HE: regressive redistribution is less of a problem in HE systems in fairly equal societies, with redistributive general taxation and the efficiency advantages of cost-sharing rely on assumptions that state provision is inherently inefficient (Johnstone, 2004).

Altbach suggests that increased private funding for HE will become the global norm and even national systems will shift more costs away from the state, leading him to conclude that "the idea of an academic degree as primarily a 'private good' that benefits the individual rather than a 'public good' for society is now widely accepted" (1999:311). Cost-sharing policies are particularly relevant to this study as they mark and area where differing ideas about the value

of HE conflict. Furthermore the balance struck between public and private funding in national systems illustrates how HE is positioned as a public or a private good.

The economisation of HE

The expansion of HE has gone hand in hand with the rise of economic thinking about the role of universities in modern society. Gornitzka & Maassen (2000) suggest governmental views on HE have been ‘economised’ both in how policy is set out and the role HE is expected to play in the state. The roots of this trend are the concept of human capital, developed by Schultz in the 1960’s (Teixeira, 2000) which marked the starting point for a ‘new era’ in educational thinking that stressed the measureable, financial value of HE and the vital role of increased human capital in national economic development. Cost-benefit analysis of the value of HE emerged from these ideas, leading the widespread use of RoR measures by international bodies such as the OECD and World Bank, as a way to compare the efficiency and effectiveness of national systems (as discussed in section 5).

These theories and approaches have been criticised as promoting the financial and private returns to HE, while downplaying the less measurable non-financial and social returns of HE (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004). Others have disputed any clear link between increased participation in HE and national growth amongst developed nations (Wolf, 2010). Despite such critiques, economic approaches and ideas have maintained their influence, most clearly in today’s discourse about knowledge economies. These theories involve the apparent shift in the nature of modern economies, where management of knowledge and information-based industries becomes the driving factor in national growth and success. In this post-industrial setting the needs of the knowledge society replace traditional concerns about manpower planning, where governments had sought to match the level of technical skills to the demands of specific industries. In knowledge economies the priority is placed on developing flexible skills and working habits, innovation and attitudes of adaptability. Indeed many educationalists suggest that HE is being realigned as primarily a source of productive, flexible workers in a modern economy. (Trow, 2005; Wolf, 2002a and Murphy, 1993). Gornitzka & Maassen note that it is “virtually taken for granted that the socio-economic development of a society is becoming more and more dependent on the way knowledge is produced, transferred, and handled” and this inevitably encourages a contemporary focus on universities as socio-economic levers (2000:225).

1.4.3 The influence of globalisation on HE

Several common threads can be identified in these processes of convergence and international trends in HE all of which have important implications for the way the value of HE is understood. One is that more HE is needed in contemporary society to respond to increased demand and to serve the needs of knowledge economies. A second is that a smaller role for nation states in HE is desirable and increased private funding beneficial. A third thread is a tendency to a focus on economic factors and functions in HE. All of these threads reflect the influence of globalisation ideas and a set of ideological preferences towards free markets and small states which have become an integral part of the logic of globalisation (Stiglitz, 2005).

There are several reasons to handle globalisation ideas about HE with some scepticism. Firstly, globalisation ideas have become ubiquitous and are too casually used to justify changes in HE. Neave is particularly good at capturing the slippery nature of globalisation as a policy rationale, noting that in the ‘jungle’ of globalisation “*the economic, the political, the commercial, the sociological and last but not least, the ideological flourish in richly combined and exotic forms to entrap the wary*” Neave, (2007:161). In this way globalisation offers an adaptable, and apparently ideologically neutral rationale for the need for change in HE, which can be linked to a wide array of policies (Neave, 2007). Globalisation ideas also tend to narrow HE policy debates. Ball (2008) describes how globalisation ideas, mediated via bodies such as the World Bank, OECD and EU, frame and limit what is seen as possible in national HE policy, in reference to constant pressures from international competition and the imperatives of the knowledge economy. This leads to two problematic tendencies: changes in HE are often accepted as inevitable, reducing governments’ ability to steer their own HE policy to take account of national factors and needs (Kubow & Fossum, 2007); and, HE policies are increasingly presented as ideologically neutral and based on pragmatism, leading to a neglect of the role of politics and ideology in shaping contemporary HE. As Barnett notes, the context of globalisation can be debilitating to good comparative analysis of HE systems “because it has done its work as ideology: the projects that are sweeping across universities world-wide have come to be seen as natural, the way things have to be” (Barnett, 2003:62).

Implications of this background for a comparison of Norway and England

In setting out these ideas and trends it is clear that there increasing pressure is placed on the value of HE, both to the individual and the state in this contemporary setting, in a way which tends to focus on economic, measureable features of HE. It also seems that trends related to convergence, internationalization and globalization need to be handled with some scepticism when comparing national systems. For all the focus on convergence and policy trends within Europe, the national level in HE also remains important, most fundamentally because the primary source of HE funding still remains national governments (De Boer & File, 2009) but also as signs of variation persists in how trends are translated and applied. This fits well with Arnove's (2003) pragmatic and research-oriented approach: he argues it is more useful for comparativists to see the influence of globalisation and international issues as working through 'dialectic' with national and local level influences, rather than dictating the course of change. This study will therefore question how far claims to convergence, and the ideas that drive them, stand up from in this particular comparative example.

2 What is value? Unpacking and operationalising value in HE

A high value is clearly placed on HE in Norway and England: both states support and maintain networks of institutions and expect them to provide for a number of roles and functions. As individuals many of us spend years within HE systems and aspire for our children to do so. However, it remains unclear why exactly HE is so valuable. Despite more of it being demanded by the state, society, students, academics, businesses and employers, these groups inevitably differ in what they think the primary function of HE is, and should be. Most HE systems combine a range of functions, with undergraduate education just one alongside graduate education, professional training, research and cultural maintenance. The theoretical framework for this study assumes the value of HE in general, and a degree specifically, is complex and emerges from many perspectives including subjective and objective factors. Value must be unpacked and operationalised to make it possible to answer the research questions and offer an integrated analysis. Barnett suggests that “Values is a term that dare not speak its name, at least within the university” (2003:119) and so we cannot expect to identify or compare value without some theoretical foundation to help in identifying and interpreting the values expressed in policy and amongst students.

This chapter identifies four contrasting narratives as a framework to be used to aid comparison and analysis throughout the study. It goes on to consider how far these narratives and the values they embody might be expected to work alongside one another, or conflict with each other. This approach does have some important limitations: it simplifies a vast topic which is inherently subjective. While many alternative approaches could have been taken to categorise HE value, this approach fits with the theoretical and ontological orientation of the study and is useful in interpreting and clarifying students’ views on value in particular. While the study is focused on the value of degree level education HE’s broader contribution to knowledge, research economic, social and political life will be mapped: as Bleiklie & Bykeflot (2001) note, it is near impossible to separate teaching and research functions in practice or theory and these inevitably lead to wide-ranging impacts on the nation. To help segment perspectives on value two cross-cutting tensions will be drawn out: intrinsic and

Instrumental perspectives on HE will be contrasted⁵; and, where possible, distinctions will be drawn between HE roles focused on macro benefits and those focused on micro level benefits to the individual. In this way, sense of the kinds of values degree-level is associated with will be mapped out.

2.1.1 Intrinsic roles and values: HE as an end in itself

“It is assumed that the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education - or that the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth... In our search for aims in education, we are not concerned, therefore, with finding an end outside of the educative process to which education is subordinate. Our whole conception forbids.”
John Dewey, Democracy and Education (1916)

The philosophical traditions set out by Dewey assume that HE should be valued as an end in itself, and that attaching ulterior aims to education tends to undermine its effectiveness and the benefits it offers the individual and society (Dewey, 1916). This ideal is often associated with traditions of a liberal education which shaped many European HE systems. Indeed, Barnett (1994) argues that, while this perspective on HE may not often be set out explicitly there remains a consistent “cluster of aims, values and general ideas which have traditionally been associated with HE” which are at work over time and across systems, emphasising HE’s role in individual development, intellectual growth, empowerment and enlightenment (Barnett, 1994:8). Axelrod (2002) makes similar arguments in defence of a liberal, intellectual focus in HE free from constant efforts to demonstrate utility, inspired by developments in the Canadian HE system. From this intrinsic perspective the creation of value emerges from the same educational process for individuals and nations: individuals learn and develop, and cumulatively this leads to social and cultural benefits which are assumed to be extensive, but must be allowed to take place as an outcome of primary academic and intellectual functions. This intrinsic ideal can be seen as forming two more distinct narratives focused on the individual benefits of self-development, and social or national benefits related to cultural maintenance and the promotion of beneficial qualities and principles amongst the population.

The role of HE in self-development is strongly associated with traditional conceptions of the campus or collegiate university life that have been particularly influential on ideas about

⁵ This approach is similar to that used by Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot (2001) who set out a ‘spectrum of value’ in HE, from the more cultural to utilitarian perspectives.

undergraduate learning; the university environment is ideally one where students are brought together with academics and peers to study intensively, engaged in a process of learning for its own sake (Kerr, 2001). Barnett (1994) describes the liberal student experience as involving a cultural experience, enlargement of the mind and being involved in a process larger than oneself. This fits well with Light's (2001) reflections on elite university life in the US where the greatest individual development and academic outcomes are supported by an interlinked experience of academic and social at university.

This version of the student experience draws on humanist traditions, particularly Rousseau's theories on education. Rousseau (1762) asserted that humans are inherently learning beings and if put in the right environment, with minimum interference and intellectual freedom, people would not just be educated but become fully developed, virtuous adults. Such ideals are reflected in national traditions in the UK and Norway. In the UK, traditions of elite education aimed at creating cultured, well-rounded gentlemen through processes of a very broad, cultural education (McLean, 1995). In Norway these ideals find expression in the concept of 'dannelse', which refers to qualities of a fully formed person involving knowledgeable but also a well-developed character. While this intrinsic perspective on education has tended to be associated with traditional and elitist forms of HE and ideas of innate ability in the UK, dannelse has its roots in movements for popular education and political engagement amongst the Scandinavian peasantry and emphasises the role of teaching to develop skills and the wider environment in development (Stråth, 2005).

HE can also be seen to provide for a range of cultural and social roles, and to foster qualities and behaviours valuable in modern, democratic societies. While these perspectives present value in relation to social and cultural outcomes beyond education, they also emphasise a form of HE which is autonomous and free from outside targets or pressures: as noted above, these benefits emerge from the HE environment, rather than being the goal of HE.

Universities have long been seen as unique social, cultural and intellectual spaces which create conditions for learning and developing knowledge hard to replicate elsewhere.

Universities play a central role in preserving, transmitting and developing culture; a thriving national culture depends on infrastructure such as libraries, archives, experts, galleries, spaces for performance and debate and HE has come to be one, if not the most important, provider of these functions in many societies. (Altbach, 2004). Universities have played a role as a crucible for new ideas and the development of social critiques and political movements

(Gumport, 2007). These roles may not have the obvious relevance and importance in countries such as Norway and the UK that they once did, but they remain features of HE's traditional role which are hard to replace through structures or sites. An American academic recently set out a defence of these roles for the university:

Universities exist for a very special reason. They exist to create a forum in which students, professors, and researchers may explore every issue from every side without fear of official condemnation or judgment. They exist to serve as a safe haven in which even the most controversial and despised views may be aired, confronted, and considered".
(Professor Geoff Stone, 2007)

On top of these more principled points, it is widely believed that the modern nation states require a population that is both more educated overall and is equipped with the ability and disposition to engage in civil society and democracy, indeed mass education systems seem to develop quite consistently as democratic participation in governance is widened (Cummings, 2003:68). It is now widely accepted that HE should offer certain kinds of benefits to society including; a more informed and responsive electorate, cultural tolerance and mutual understanding; social justice and improvements in the overall quality of life (OECD, 1999). These kinds of outcomes are increasingly seen as a subject for measurement by organisations such as the OECD (2009a) or UNESCO (UNESCO, 1995) in attempts to better monitor and understand the value of HE in developing tolerant, well-informed and engaged societies.

Both of these intrinsic perspectives (individual and collective) have implications for the location of power and influence in HE systems. Kogan et al. (2006:75) note that autonomy is often seen as a requirement for these functions to take place as "the very nature of knowledge generation requires freedom from direction, if it is to result in the disinterested and critical search for knowledge". A focus on these intrinsic, intellectual and autonomous functions of HE have been widely criticised as elitist or as offering an 'ivory tower' version of HE which does not offering enough demonstrable benefits to justify the support and status conferred on it (Barnett, 1994). Indeed, as attempts to demonstrate utilitarian benefits are anathema to these perspectives on HE they can easily appear to be expendable where funding is tight. Castells' (1994) argument that developing countries should focus on technical and scientific HE, instead of traditional liberal models, is one example of this kind of critique in action.

2.1.2 Instrumental aims and values: HE as a means to an end

These intrinsic ideas of education contrast with a range of more instrumental roles attributed to HE. These perspectives position the value of HE as a means ends which are tangential to, or go well beyond educational aims.

HE's economic value: a good investment

As discussed in the background of this study (section 1.4) expansion of HE is widely expected to foster economic growth and strong financial returns to individuals and the nation. There are several influential theories describing how this economic value is created. Economists and thinkers as far back as Adam Smith have suggested that an individual's skills and abilities could be seen as a form of capital, analogous to financial capital. Education that builds skills or abilities, particularly in ways that increase productivity, can therefore be seen as an investment. This human capital perspective gained influence in the 60's, particularly through the work of Schultz and Becker and was widely used to support HE expansion and justify the costs involved (Teixeira, 2000). From a human capital perspective, HE is an important driver of growth on a national (macro) level, and a good private investment on the individual (micro) level (Mincer, 1995). Significantly, the pace of HE expansion seems to have progressed in parallel with the popularity of these arguments of a HE-growth link (Teixeira, 2000).

These economic perspectives on value seem to be more robust and measureable than intrinsic ideas but attempts to demonstrate these ideas and clarify the functions of HE involved have led to some controversy. Shultz (1961) and many others since have investigated the relationship between national enrolment or graduation rates, and their economic growth.

While positive conclusions and correlations have been shown, the robustness of this relationship and the assumptions of nature of this link have come under criticism.

Psacahrapoulous (1984) and Wolf (2002a) argue that this relationship is much weaker in modern economies with mass education systems, and Murphy suggests that even where a correlation between increasing HE enrolments and growth HE is more likely "the cart not the horse of economic growth" (1993:19). Despite these critiques, the assumptions that more HE is a good economic investment for the nation, and for the individual, have proved influential and enduring, not least through measures such as rates of returns (section 5). They have been reinforced by links to globalization ideas about knowledge economies, where mass HE's economic importance is underlined as a driver of higher overall levels of education and skills,

a way of creating a flexible and responsive workforce and ensuring nations are equipped for new economic challenges posed by global competition (Trow, 2005).

HE's vocational benefits: training for working life and the professions

Closely related to these ideas about the general economic value of HE are ones which focus more specifically on HE's role in developing vocational skills and technical learning, to respond to demands and skill-shortages in growing industry and business sectors. These vocational values can be seen as forming two sub-sets of professional training and technical training. Castells (2001) sees training professional training (of bureaucrats and specialists in particular) as a more persistent and important HE function than scientific research or the development of knowledge. The history of HE systems shows that many modern systems were founded for professional training, as European states required more civil servants and professional classes grew (Castells, 2001) and the value and importance of this role has arguably only increased over time. Universities are presented as crucial for maintaining and transmitting professional competence and quality for professions such as medicine, law and engineering (OECD, 1999). This vocational function doesn't just involve skills development but also the promotion of values such as professional responsibility and service to society; indeed a professional orientation to knowledge can be argued to differ from a vocational one based on this sense that skills should serve society, as well as the individual (Ylijoki, 2000).

A technical vocational perspective on HE's value focuses more on specific, in demand skills. As Cummings argues "a major goal of modern education is to provide human resources for the various positions that are available in the economy" (2003:113). The roots of this idea are in rationalistic state traditions where attempts to plan for 'manpower needs' involved aligning the outputs of university (certain groups of graduates) with the gaps in the labour market, an approach particularly influential in the formation of Norwegian HE (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2001). From this technical and vocational perspective the value of learning and knowledge passed on via HE is dependent on how relevant and applicable it is future employment. A problem with these approaches to planning for HE's role is that vocational and skills needs vary between countries and over time so the precise role and aim for HE must adapt. Cummings (2003) describes a powerful relationship between education systems and labour markets, where different the patterns in the structures and values of working life are reflected in education. This makes it important to consider how the ideals of the 'good worker' and

‘good job’ vary to understanding HEs relationship with work (Cummings, 2003:53). The contemporary focus on knowledge economies (section 1.4) tends to emphasise HE’s role in supporting transferable and general skills, such as computer skills, managing information and qualities of flexibility, over specific technical or subject area skills (OECD, 1999).

HE’s social value: ambiguous impacts on the social order

Kubow & Fossum note that “education, for both academics and vocationalists, ultimately embraces the goal of social mobility” (2007:159). HE is widely assumed to be a driver of increased social mobility, a role assumed to fit well alongside other functions, but this is the source of some controversy. HE can be seen as a powerful force of equal opportunity or as creating structures that maintains social distinctions and the existing social order.

Post-war HE policies and the rapid expansion of HE in the 60’s and 70’s were influenced by the idea that more HE would lead to fairer societies. Taxeira (2000:264) notes that “governments viewed education as a major instrument for improving and equalising social opportunities. There was a strong belief that education could be a powerful force to promote social mobility”. Universal state funding or targeted support for costs were supported on this basis, and in the Scandinavian countries in particular state-funded HE began to be seen as a fundamental right, and feature of a equal, just society and comprehensive welfare state (Kogan et al, 2006). Despite these ideas and significant expansion, many countries struggled to bring in students from less well off backgrounds, or under-represented groups. Alison Wolf summarises the problem that “In every developed country, expanding higher education has done less for equal opportunity than one might expect - while steering large subsidies towards the middle classes” (Woolf, 2002b).

One explanation for this failure is offered by an alternative perspective on HE’s social role: that it works as a mechanism to sort the population based on background and status, in a way that embeds social divisions. This is the core argument of screening theory: that HE serves to identify students with particular attributes acquired at birth or due to family background, but that it does little to produce or improve on those attributes (Teixeira, 2000). These arguments were important elements in critical social theory that gained popularity in the 1970’s and again in the 1990s, particularly through Bourdieu’s argument that HE’s primary function was elite reproduction (see Field, 2008). This offers an explanation of how HE might prove valuable to individuals, without this necessarily reflecting higher skills or productivity, and so

directly disputes the central ideas of human capital theory. According to these theories HE contributes little to productivity or social mobility but instead acts to sort the population into hierarchies of pay and employment and maintain a stable social order. Wolf (2002a) argues that “Employers often use graduate entry as a way of ‘screening’ applicants: that is, targeting people who have shown application, and are assumed to be in the top half of the cohort intellectually”, a shortcut which is helpful to employers but is hardly supportive of mobility and which will disadvantage able candidates without credentials. Another angle on screening is offered by Ball et al. (2002) who argue that students’ own decisions to apply for HE demonstrate a tendency to ‘self-sort’: as university is seen as part of a middle-class lifestyle, social class and background are important in deciding which students feel they can, and should attend. In a similar vein, Castells (2001) argues that HE systems have long worked as a mechanism to select and socialise elites and preserve the social order. While social elites may have become less clearly defined, HE’s role in maintaining differences in status and outcomes and in justifying them, is arguable even greater in modern society. As HE qualifications are required in more jobs in modern, high-skill economies, higher qualifications become increasingly valuable as a ‘pass’ into elite roles, the status and conditions of non-graduate jobs decline and the impact of screening processes is magnified (Wolf, 2002a). This phenomenon of academic inflation tends to make HE an increasingly powerful determinant of individual opportunities, making the processes that determine access to HE crucial in shaping broader patterns of social status and inequality (Wolf, 2002a). In modern democratic societies the more acceptable justifications for such differences in wealth and status, and for access to HE, involve meritocratic ideas. Young (2001) coined the term meritocracy to describe societies that reward talent or ability through competitive systems to highlight how this idea could rationalise and justifying a very high level of inequality, but also imply those who do not rise deserve a bad outcome. He recently commented on how powerfully the idea of meritocracy seemed to have been embraced in British education, and combines with a selective and hierarchical school system to magnify inequality and differences in opportunity:

“Ability of a conventional kind, which used to be distributed between the classes more or less at random, has become much more highly concentrated by the engine of education. A social revolution has been accomplished by harnessing schools and universities to the task of sieving people according to education's narrow band of values.” (Young, 2001)

Massification and widening participation may not, therefore reduce the importance of HE’s role in determining social outcomes, but see HE’s influence on individual life chances and become more important, and more variable.

2.1.3 Intrinsic or instrumental values: where does knowledge fit in?

A wide range of intrinsic and instrumental roles and ideas about the value of HE have been touched upon, but a central role for HE of knowledge creation and transmission, has not been addressed. McLean notes that “the most desirable kinds of knowledge, the best ways of transmitting it, and how to identify those who can benefit” are remarkably durable over time (McLean,1995:20), but more recent debates have seen the value of knowledge, and role of HE in transmitting it, become less clear. Ideas about knowledge also span the intrinsic and instrumental divide, with ideals of intellectual curiosity, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the search for truth and powerfully intrinsic but all seemingly bound to lead to much more practical benefits. Furthermore, the development of knowledge is certainly not exclusive to HE but is ubiquitous across all education and research environments, in business, international organizations and amongst individuals pursuing their own interests. This ambiguity in how far HE’s knowledge roles involve reflects intrinsic or instrumental principles is linked to debates about what forms of knowledge are most important and how knowledge should be developed in contemporary society.

Traditions of knowledge formed through ‘pure’ research or by following intellectual curiosity have come under increased criticism. These more intrinsic perspectives on knowledge were founded on Enlightenment ideals of rationality and scientific progress which are challenged by the rise of relativism and post-modernism. These perspectives question the possibility and relevance of searching for stable truths or facts; these ideas have reduced the status of expert academic knowledge and weakened faith in the inherent value of scientific processes (Barnett, 1994). Kerr (2001) reflects on his own increasing scepticism towards new knowledge and progress, and therefore towards the role of universities:

“In 1963, I was generally optimistic about the workings of the knowledge process... I shared the view of Socrates that ‘there is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance’. I shared the confident belief that the progress of knowledge leads to progress through knowledge. In the 1990s I have more reservations, as do many others... New knowledge, like addictive drugs, can have bad as well as good effects... Knowledge is not so clearly all good, and certainly not the one and only “one good”. The university, consequently, needs to be more careful in what it does and less arrogant about what it claims it can do.”
(Kerr, 2001:155)

As ideas, principles and processes that traditionally guided knowledge development in HE come under strain, more instrumental approaches to knowledge are on the rise. One of the more influential arguments about these apparent shifts in the way knowledge production is

viewed and organised is found in Gibbons ‘modes’ of knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994 as cited in Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2001). This suggests that knowledge can be categorised in terms of how it is produced, and the outcomes it produces. Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot (2001) take up these ideas and map out the relationship between different modes of knowledge, the values they embody and their procedures. They also note the influence of arguments that there is a need to shift towards ‘mode 2’ knowledge production in HE, to solve specific problems or address pre-defined needs (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2001).

Table 1: Two modes of knowledge⁶

Mode	Knowledge as...	Typical examples/ideals	Key contrasts in values		
Mode 1	a kind of procedure	Scientific method Disinterested/primary research The autonomous university	Theoretical	Pure	Cultural
Mode 2	a kind of outcome	Partnership working with industry/application Commercial research The entrepreneurial university	Practical	Applied	Utilitarian

As table 1 makes clear, these different ways of defining and producing knowledge offer different interpretations of the value and importance of HE. From a ‘mode 1’ perspective, the environment and procedures of academic life and intrinsic values of exploration lead to knowledge that is valuable for its own sake, as well as in any additional benefits that emerge. In contrast ‘mode 2’ knowledge is only valuable if it can be used for in wider application for some clear purpose. It was stated at the start of this section that the value of HE emerges to a great extent from the relationship between HE, society and knowledge; if the kinds of knowledge deemed most important and valuable are undergoing these kinds of shifts the way HE’s value is understood and constructed will inevitably change as well. However, critics such as Ziman (1996, as cited in Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2001) have suggested that these modes of knowledge arguments tend to overstate changes in the values and production of knowledge and that these modes are not clearly separable; in practice both take place together in all sorts of knowledge production settings, with differing intended applications. Even if this shift has been exaggerated, a more instrumental view of knowledge does seem to be gaining ground. Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot (2001) argue that this does not so much relate to new modes of

⁶ Table based on overview of the modes of knowledge debate in Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot (2001)

knowledge, but a new way of emphasizing elements of what knowledge is over others, in a way that undermines the value of traditional academic roles and weakens the positions of HE in defining the value of knowledge.

2.2 A framework for value in HE: four key narratives

To operationalise the complex theoretical debates discussed above four narratives describing HE's central value have been set out (see table 2). These bring together and simplify the various perspectives on the various aims, functions and values related to HE and clarify the broad ideas or principles these are based on. The framework highlights tensions important in this study, involving how the value of HE is seen as relating to the individual and society and how far value is related to instrumental functions and values (where HE is a means to wider ends), or intrinsic functions and values (where the processes of HE are seen as an ends in themselves). As this narrative structure will be important in planning and analysing discussions with students it has been reconfigured to propose how such narratives might be expressed in students' views on issues such as degree choice (table 3) and will be reconsidered in the concluding chapter (7.1).

Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot (2001) have discussed the challenges of investigating changing HE values, particularly from comparative perspectives, due to cross-national variations and the complexity of the relationships between higher education, nations and societies; they conclude that "As scholars we may be faced with the challenge of being able to develop concepts that enable us to grasp more than one trend and possibly contradicting elements" (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2001:11) Table 2 demonstrates an attempt to provide such an approach to value, to account for several perspectives in a way that anticipates that contradictions may well arise in how these narratives relate to HE value in Norway and the UK.

Table 2: A theoretical framework for value in HE: four key narratives

	Primarily focused on intrinsic values		Primarily focused on Instrumental value	
Value primarily seen in terms of:	Cultural/ intellectual narrative	Self –development narrative	Economic & employment narrative	Welfare state & social mobility narrative
Value orientation	Cultural and academic values	Self-development/ fulfillment	Economic values	Social values
Values drawn from	Academic traditions and principles of ‘pure’ research	Liberal ideals of education and developmental psychology	Human capital theory, market models and labour planning	Ideals of the welfare state. Social mobility and meritocratic societies
Key role for HE	Create a space for disinterested search for truth/or ‘pure’ knowledge	Provide a unique experience that broadens the mind and develops useful qualities	Develop skills and knowledge that meet the demands of employers and serve economic strength.	Provide a upwards route for mobility and a method for social sorting
Core concepts	Excellence, autonomy, intellectual independence	The search for meaning, individual aptitudes and capabilities	Efficiency, competitiveness, utility and flexibility	Equality of opportunity, mobility, meritocracy.
Individual ideal: a vision of a good student	The scholar: an independent minded intellectual and researcher	The journeyman: a seeker of broader understanding and new worldviews	The consumer: a demanding student focused on quality, relevance and employability.	The citizen: a content citizen who has found their social position through fair opportunities.
Collective ideal: a vision of a good society	A society of people who are well educated, rational and cultured	A society of people able to make use of their individual capacities/ skills	A society where individual capacities and skills meet market demand and strengthen the economy	A society where all have the opportunity to rise according to merit and opportunities are open to all.
Skills to be developed	Logic, rigour, thirst for knowledge	Maturity, clear sense of self critical thinking.	Skills as demanded by employers	Skills for citizenship and adaptability to modern world
Criticism	Elitist, old fashioned	Indulgent, lacking utility	Narrow, shallow	Unselective, low quality

Table 3: Hypothesised student views reflecting the four key narratives

	Primarily focused on intrinsic values		Primarily focused on Instrumental value	
Value in terms of:	Cultural & intellectual narrative	Self-development narrative	Economic & employment narrative	Welfare state & social mobility narrative
A degree is primarily about...	Advanced, challenging learning	Opportunities for self-development	An investment and a vital qualification for working life	A right for those who are bright, and route to mobility
How should one choose a degree?	Chosen with individuals talents in mind	Chosen with interest in mind and to find a niche that suits	Chosen by weighing up costs and benefits, particularly in wages and employment	Choices should not be constrained by background
What is the main benefit of a degree?	Learning more, gaining new, deeper understanding	The experience of getting it and accompanying self development.	Better job opportunities and an investment in higher pay	Broadened opportunities and increased social mobility

A narrative approach is useful in cases where it is necessary to synthesise and make links between a range of ideas, but it also inevitably simplifies issues and establishes divisions between ideas which exist along a spectrum of difference (Bridgman & Barry, 2002). In practice each narrative may well contain a range of differing forms and may erroneously combine different ideas under one narrative. However, previous narrative approaches have found surprising stability in terms of the broad ideas and stories used to make sense of complex social phenomena such as globalisation (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005) and financial regulation (Bridgman & Barry, 2002). This framework also helps to address important challenges in this study by providing a starting point for comparing more subjective features of value, that may link macro level perspectives on value (from policy), with micro level perspectives (amongst students). Furthermore, the theoretical discussion in this chapter, and the discussion of the contemporary HE landscape (section 4) both suggest there may be pressures at work which change the way the value of HE is understood and presented; such a narrative approach offers a way of seeking out evidence of the balance and priority between these perspectives on HE have changed over time in policy, and how they stand now from a student perspective.

2.3 Complimentary or contradictory narratives?

These various narratives present different functions as the defining feature in HE value. In practice, all HE systems will likely reflect a mixture of these narratives and certainly neither the English or Norwegian system is likely to entirely overlook any of them. This raises the question of how these differing values might be expected to relate to one another. Based on the theoretical debates set out in this chapter it is important to consider if these narratives are likely to work together and complement each other, or to conflict and undermine one another. This question of conflict or compatibility between narratives and values is also important to the central questions and approach of this study, of exploring how different perspectives on value might be interrelated and influence one another.

A strong argument that very different narratives and ideas about the value of HE can, and do, coexist is put forward by Castells (2001); he points out that HE systems have long maintained numerous divergent, if not outright contradictory roles. Individual systems may differ in how they balance out these elements, and must be fairly robust to do so successfully, but all systems are mixed (Castells, 2001). One way that this mix may be contained is by universities themselves containing quite independent disciplinary and departmental sub-groups, who can maintain quite differing sets of values and priorities. This is supported by Becher & Trowler's (2001) work on distinctive 'academic territories' or 'tribes' and Ylijoki's (2000) findings of extensive disciplinary differences, and contrasting 'moral orders', within universities which led her to conclude that students' ideas about value and the purpose of HE are largely established within departments or disciplines. (This underlines the importance of comparing students' views across subject groupings, as well as national groupings. See section 3.3.1)

In contrast to these ideas, there are a number of arguments that certain views on the role and value of HE are fundamentally opposed. In particular several arguments assert instrumental aims and values are undermining intrinsic aims. Becher & Trowler (2001:5) suggest that:

" there has been an increasing emphasis in government policy and rhetoric on the vocational functions of HE, in terms both of its role in supplying qualified students for the professions, industry and commerce and in terms of its research function. This has meant de-emphasizing its other roles, those concerned with the general development of individuals' minds and capabilities, contributing culturally to the community and enhancing knowledge and understanding for their own sakes, rather than for utilitarian ends."

Indeed, many educationalists have suggested a focus on utilitarian ends in general, and specifically the application of economic values is threatening intrinsic values and the academic, social and cultural roles of HE (see Barnett, 1993; Trow, 2005; Wolf, 2002a and Murphy, 1993).

This apparent narrowing of values and rise of instrumental roles is ascribed to several processes. The first is that changes have taken place as the balance of power in HE systems has shifted between key groups and actors. Burton-Clark's work (see Becher and Trowler 2001) suggested that the state, the market and academics support differing ideals about the roles of HE, and what counts as valuable knowledge; as power shifts from one group to another, the dominant ideas about HE change. This has been used to explain trends to marketisation in HE processes and values. A second process relates to Trow's (1974) work on the massification and more recently Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot's (2001) arguments that massification has created enormous pressures on HE systems. Growth has made HE more visible and politicised as budgets come under greater scrutiny, clear outputs are demanded and broad swathes of society become directly interested in HE systems, as students, parents or employers. Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot's (2001) suggest these outside interests will all bring new, largely instrumental demands to bear, crowding out or weakening HE's traditional role and more 'cultural' values. Finally, Barnett (1994, 2003) argues that a fundamental shift in the relationship between HE and society has taken place, where the intrinsic worth of HE is being overwritten or displaced altogether, to an extent which undermines social understanding of HE's role and could lead to a crisis in the UK system:

"In the public debate over higher education, what we see is mostly an exchange over the size and costs of the higher education system. Justifications for changes to the system are couched in terms of economic need or individual rights to access, in other words, a primary belief in the value of HE to the national economy or as a vehicle for improving life chances." (Barnett, 1994:4).

There are persuasive arguments suggesting that instrumental, and particularly economic values and narratives, are gaining ground, driven by theoretical, political and social processes. However, it cannot be assumed that a sense of crisis, largely described from academic perspectives, offers a full and balanced picture of the contemporary state of values in HE. It may be prudent to consider these predictions in light of the fact that a crisis in academic values has been declared repeatedly over recent decades. Kerr points out that the early 1970's saw widespread predictions of the collapse of academic ideals, listing titles that illustrate this

mood: “Academics in retreat (1971)”, “Back to the Middle Ages (1969)” and the “Bankruptcy of Academic policy (1972)” among others (Kerr, 2001:157). Furthermore, many of these arguments are largely based on the UK and US systems and should not be assumed to apply in the Norwegian context. Indeed, Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot (2001) warn that trends towards academic disempowerment may not be apply in all states and find evidence that while academic autonomy was curtailed between the 1980’s and 2000 in England, autonomy in Norway appeared to be relatively stable (Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot 2001:10).

In light of this theoretical background, it seems the goal in comparing national HE systems should not be to establish which one narrative or perspectives sums up the views in any particular country best, but to try and establish where the balance lies between different perspectives and values, and how these relate to each other. Policy shifts, RoRs and student attitudes can all help to identify the relative weight placed on these different narratives and the degree to which the value of HE is defined by one, all, or different combinations of them.

3 Methodology

The central focus of this thesis is a piece of primary, qualitative research, involving a series of discussion groups with students in Norway and England; other strands of research will draw on quantitative data and secondary sources. The overall approach involved a mixed research model and triangulation across several strands of research. This allows a range of evidence and perspectives to be synthesized to provide a broad comparative perspective on the way the value of HE is constructed and understood in both countries. This section explains the choice of research strategy, describes the methodology used in each of the three strands, and the analysis process used to bring them together. It builds on the discussion of theoretical perspectives found in section 2.

3.1.1 Research strategy: triangulation and a mixed model

This research explores how the value of a degree is constructed in two countries, and involves a range of research questions that necessarily draw on a multi-faceted idea about what value is and how it can be measured. Part of the rationale for this study is to broaden out from the economic interpretations of HE value widely used in contemporary policy. The value of a degree is approached as an abstract, complex topic with no easy or obvious set of rules for operationalising it as a research topic. This study attempts to operationalise it in terms of key narratives about value (section 2.2). This provides a theoretical starting point that ensures a broad range of values at work in HE are considered and which highlights key cross-cutting issues for investigation across the strands, but it does not solve the problem of how to investigate value comparatively or understand students' views. Referring back to the integrative theoretical model this research is based upon, the research strategy has to address two key challenges:

- It must build in methods to measure or explore the idea of value, which are appropriate to each of the three different perspectives taken on degree value.
- It must find a way of integrating these different approaches into one coherent research strategy that addresses the central research question.

A mixed model is clearly one that fits with the theoretical background of the study and with these challenges. Systems theory provides an approach to studying social systems that aims at a more dynamic and holistic analysis and characteristically employs mixed methods and

triangulation (Patton, 2002). If we assume all paradigms have something to offer, then a mixed research strategy offers the best way of understanding the phenomena at hand (Tashakkori & Teddlie (2002). A mixed model of research is also a pragmatic choice: perspectives on value that are more subjective and more objective are unlikely to be best served by one set of methods.

To investigate strand 1 (policy) a wide range of methods could be adopted. Policy documents could be analysed or interviews and questionnaires could be administered to politicians and academics. Fortunately, these approaches have been taken already in large comparative and national studies, and these provide the material for a analysis of recent HE policy issues, and also provide comparative data on funding systems and the balance of public and private spending, which offers a quantitative perspective on HE's value as constructed by policy. To investigate strand 2 (RoRs) comparative data is needed that measures key aspects of the financial benefit associated with degree level education: secondary quantitative data sources are appropriate for this and support reliable, generalisable findings. Finally, to investigate strand 3 (student's views) a more open, holistic approach seems suitable, as this strand offers the chance to explore how students link up different perspectives on value and to see if important ideas about value are missing from the policy and financial return perspectives. A qualitative approach allows for participant-led discussions and for more in-depth understanding of value, although it does not provide the basis for generalisable findings; the conclusions drawn from this strand are exploratory, not explanatory (Patton, 2002). A systems orientation is also useful here, as a way of making sense of complex social issues and interpreting qualitative data (Patton, 2002:120).

The issue of value justifies a range of methods, but it is also important to address how these can be integrated into an overall research strategy. The theoretical model (Figure 2) assumes that these different perspectives on value do not operate in isolation, but interact and influence on another to construct the overall value of a degree in each country. This leads into a key debate about mixing research methods: how far should different methods be used in parallel or blended and inter-woven throughout the research? Tashakkori & Teddlie (2002) suggest that mixed methods can simply mean more than one method, a mixed model of research attempts to develop a dialectic relationship between different approaches, theoretical perspectives and sets of findings. This study will accept the potential challenges of mixed models, and keep the approach fairly simple by handling each strand of research

independently at first, allowing different perspectives on value to be judged within their own frames of reference; initial comparative conclusions will be set out for each strand to avoid confusion or problems of paradigmatic clashes or incompatibility (Bryman, 2008). These strands will then be integrated, through two approaches. First a shared theoretical framework for value in HE will be used as an analytical tool across the policy and student strands. Second, the discussion of findings and conclusions will be based on a triangulation of findings and contrasting perspectives across the strands. Triangulation can be seen as simply a way of strengthening validity, by corroborating different sets of findings and employing methods that compliment one another's weaknesses (Hammersley, as cited in Bryman, 2008). However, the logic of triangulation goes beyond improved validity, to offer benefits in the scope and explanatory power of the research. A mixed model and triangulation are both based on accepting any single method alone makes it difficult to identify and understand causal factors or relationships, and therefore guards against failing to see 'the woods for the trees' when drawing conclusions (Patton, 2002). A mixed model does not just support validity by seeking to replicate the same findings through differing methods, but allows us to address questions which "could not be answered in any other way" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002). Ideally, different findings when put together in the right way, can provide a much fuller sense of the issue studied. As the focus of this study is how different aspects of value influence one another, and form an overall system of value, this seems to apply strongly in this case. In this mixing of perspectives and approaches involved in this strategy, the final conclusions should be more than the sum of the three parts: the juxtapositions, reflections and tensions found between them allow for a richer and broader analysis (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002). The approach allows 'hard' data (such as RoRs) to be better understood and more robustly interpreted through the questions and explanations offered by 'soft' data (such as student's views), and the soft data can be more confidently interpreted when patterns in it are backed up by contextual 'hard' data. In this way the different strands are not just parallel sources but provide a set of different lenses for use in analysis and drawing out inferences (Patton, 2002).

In this case, a mixed model is justified both by its fit with the research questions and by the integrative model that forms the theoretical foundation for the study. There is a trade off to be made between breadth and depth in a study such as this, but this is endemic in social research (Patton, 2002) and inevitably, the breadth of the topic and limited time and resources mean that limits must be set on what is included. The core research questions have guided decisions on methods and the selection of sources across the three strands. What is lost in depth in some

cases, is compensated for by bringing together perspectives to offer an analysis with explanatory power and insights into how value is constructed, greater than the sum of the strands. If inconsistent ideas about value emerge through these different methods, nothing in this design requires one to be seen as correct, and another as incorrect, as the issue at hand, value, is inherently a multifaceted issue.

The specific approach used in each of the three strands is set out below, and the compromises and limitations of the methods used are discussed in more detail where relevant.

3.2 Methods for strands 1 & 2: comparisons of national policy and RoRs

These strands involve summaries of key policy and RoR data for the two countries. There is a wealth of existing data, analysis and discussion of these issues, including recent, detailed comparative work covering England/the UK and Norway. These strands have been investigated through a review of this existing information. The depth and scope of these reviews are limited by the time available, and room for discussion within this thesis. In selecting sources the guiding concerns have been to use recent, comparable sources, which directly relate to the research questions. The conclusions developed in these strands are not intended to offer particularly novel perspectives, but instead should provide a summary of the issues related to the construction of value in HE; they therefore provide useful comparative context to students' views. Few sources separate out English and UK wide policy and data, but the study will highlight where UK wide, or English only data or issues are involved.

Strand 1. Policy trends and policy rhetoric

The policy reviews focus particularly on funding arrangements for HE and how the role of HE is described and positioned in policy. In this way, it aims to build up a sense of the dominant ideas and narratives that construct and explain the value of HE to the state, and a degree to the individual, in each country. It also provides important context about the national HE systems, politics and traditions which will support more meaningful and valid interpretations of national RoRs and student views, and overall conclusions.

The policy reviews for each country focus on recent periods of significant policy and reforms: in the UK from around the time New Labour took office (from 1997) and in Norway from the

introduction of the Quality Reform agenda from 2001 onwards. Initial literature reviews sought recent comparative studies covering Norway and the UK and identified a 2006 comparative study by Kogan et al. as a central resource. This analysis is particularly valuable for this study as it considers HE changes from various perspectives including the practical, managerial and ideological. A second key source is a 2008 review of HE funding approaches by Schwarzenburger et al. (2008), which provides the foundations for a comparison of national funding systems. Additional material has been drawn in where needed. While a more exhaustive literature review on the countries' HE policies would be ideal, it would both have been time-consuming and likely have replicated this existing comparative work.

Strand 2. Rates of return

The OECD's Education at a Glance series offers an ideal resource for this study, providing recent, comparable and reliable data from the 2008 and 2009 reports, and with extensive data sets available via the OECD's website. These reports are the source for almost all the data in this strand⁷. Under OECD classifications, bachelors degrees in Norway and the UK are both categorized as Tertiary-type A education (ISCED 5A) and data for this educational level have been used where possible, although in some many only combined measures for tertiary education were available. The review of this data (section 5) maps out the key measures of the value of a degree in HE and also draws in OECD data on related issues, such as wage distribution and overall inequality. Summaries of trends in key issues have been provided where possible. Unfortunately the OECDs approach to calculating RoRs changed in 2008, so no RoR trend data are available (OECD 2008a:185).

3.3 Methods for strand 3: Students' views

This strand is based on purposively-sampled group discussions with students. It explores how students construct the value of their degree, an interest that clearly requires a qualitative approach (Patton, 2002). While interviews might have been suitable for such issues, group discussions have the added benefit of being interactive, encouraging participants not just to

⁷ Unfortunately, while the OECD published its most up-to-date data educational indicators during late 2009 (in Education at a glance 2009) many measures relevant for this study did not include data for the UK. In these cases, the 2008 Education at a Glance data was used. This means that while some cases cover data up until 2007, other data sets stop in 2004. Data tables were downloaded from the OECD's website.

say what they think, or reflect on their own personal experience, but to *justify* their views and *frame* their experiences in terms of broader ideas about the value of a degree. The participants' comments provide insights not only into their individual experience but the overall narratives and reference points used in each country to discuss and construct the value of a degree for themselves and for others.

However, there are also limitations to this approach and how far these students' views can be assumed to reflect typical views in each country. Small scale qualitative samples do not provide findings that can be generalised to whole populations, and so are weak in terms of external validity (Bryman, 2008). While concerns for validity and reliability have been taken into account, this design also draws on Lincoln and Guba's criteria for quality qualitative research and has built in steps supporting credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1994, as cited in Bryman 2008). In addressing these concerns it is accepted that while the study does not offer an absolute account of the value of a degree to students it does provide data from which a meaningful and useful investigation of the range of views amongst students taking general bachelors' degree courses in each country. On this basis they are analysed to offer explanations related to the other strands and suggestions for how value is constructed more broadly. The limitations of the design and steps taken to minimise weaknesses are discussed throughout this section.

3.3.1 Sampling approach and group structure

The choice of students to take part in this study, the sample design and recruitment are very important to the validity of the findings. In an ideal model, overall differences in national attitudes to degree level HE would be investigated through a representative sample of a broad cross section of students, taking account of issues such as student background, degree type and institution type. Within the practical confines of the study, a much more tightly drawn, purposive sampling approach has been developed, which offers a limited basis for generalising from findings but aims to maximize the comparability between countries. The sample has also been designed to attempt to include a good range of students, who can be expected to offer quite different perspectives on value in HE: issues likely to influence their views have been pre-empted and built into the sampling strategy to maximize the dependability and confirmability of the study, and demonstrate the intention to avoid approaches that are likely to be biased towards certain views or perspectives on value in HE (Bryman, 2008). By taking this approach the studies limitations in terms of transferability are

made clear and findings are made more dependable through the clear explanation of sampling principles and recording of sampling and recruitment approaches used (Bryman, 2008).

The choice of first year students, on degree (bachelor) level courses is based on a number of considerations; bachelors students are less diverse in terms of individual characteristics than Masters or PhD level, as those on post-graduate courses will have a broader age profile and very different work and life experience; as first year students have recently been engaged in the decision to attend HE or not, they can be expected to have relatively accessible ideas about the value and benefits of HE; finally, these students can also be assumed to have recently been exposed to advice and influence about the value of HE from sources such as schools, parents, government information and so on, making them a rich resource for common narratives about value.

Individual students' views are likely to be influenced by a very broad range of factors such as background, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and families' educational experience. While these are important factors they are not the focus of this study, and would require a complex and larger-scale study if they were to be taken into account. Therefore, the aim was to target 'typical' students as far as possible in each country, to allow national differences and subject differences to come to the fore. The groups represent quite a narrow snapshot of student attitudes, and findings cannot be confidently assumed to reflect overall student' views. The key sampling criteria used, alongside national groupings, is degree subject. The selection of the two subjects is described below, but the rationale for not sampling within only one subject was that it brings a sense of perspective to differences found between countries. Essentially, the sample was designed to build in a strong subject difference between groups, to provide a second level for comparison alongside the national comparative one, which offers some sense of perspective on the scale of any national difference. The rationale was that if very significant variations became apparent between students within the same country, who study very different subjects, their views are unlikely to reflect broader national attitudes; on the other hand if quite similar views were found across those studying very different subjects, this would offer a stronger basis for national comparisons.

Sampling Subjects:

It can be assumed that students in different subjects will differ in many ways, two of which are particularly relevant to this study and have been taken into account in the sample. It is

well known that students' values and views of HE are shaped by their academic discipline. Theories and studies on disciplinary culture address the cultural, normative and attitudinal variations that exist across subject areas and faculties. Becher & Trowler's work (2001) is extremely influential in this field, in particular their framework for categorizing disciplines into distinctive 'academic territories' or 'tribes': they use two key dimensions to structure this framework: a subjects' position on a hard-soft continuum, and on a pure-applied continuum. A summary of this framework and the four typologies is provided below (figure 3).

Clearly these ideal types cannot directly tell us what attitudes to expect from students. However, there is evidence to suggest students' values and beliefs about the social and personal value of their degree are shaped by their field of study. Ylijoki (2000) found evidence that students' views about the ultimate values and aims of their university education did vary along these lines. The framework was used to avoid picking subjects that were likely to provide very similar or partial perspectives on value.

Figure 3: Summary of Becher & Trowler's (2001) framework for academic tribes.

	Pure	Applied
Soft	Humanities/pure social sciences <i>e.g. History, modern languages, anthropology</i> Metaphor for knowledge: organic/river like Nature of knowledge: Reiterative, holistic, concerned with particulars, qualities, complication, personal, value-laden. Results in understanding/interpretation.	Social sciences <i>e.g. Economic and sociology</i> Metaphor for knowledge (know-how via soft-knowledge) Nature of knowledge: Functional, utilitarian, concerned with enhancement of professional practice. Results in protocols/procedures
Hard	Pure sciences <i>e.g. Biology, Chemistry, Physics</i> Metaphor for knowledge: crystalline/tree like) Nature of knowledge: Cumulative, atomistic, concerned with universals, simplification, impersonal, value-free. Results in discovery/ explanation	Applied science/Technologies <i>e.g. Mechanical engineering, pharmacy, medicine</i> Metaphor for knowledge: know-how via hard knowledge) Nature of knowledge: Purposive, pragmatic, concerned with mastery of physical environment, applies heuristic approaches. Results in products/techniques

A second issue taken into account in selecting the subjects was the likely RoR to a bachelors level education. RoRs are known to vary considerably by degree subject and discipline, reflecting different patterns of supply and demand for certain subject areas amongst other issues (Psacarapoulous et al., 2007). While students are unlikely to have detailed information on the specific returns for their degree is, they are likely to have considered the types of jobs typical for their degree, the typical status and pay of these roles and so on. This consideration

was also important to ensure comparability between groups. To illustrate, imagine a subject was chosen that offered very high returns in the UK, but low returns in Norway, this would offer a poor basis for a comparison of students' views. Similarly, two very high-return subjects would likely bias the sample towards students particularly focused on earnings. Data on average graduate pay broken down by subject is available, if patchy, for the UK and Norway. This has been used to select one subject (economics) with relatively high returns, and one with relatively low returns (biology), where the same pattern holds in each country (see appendix 3 for a summary of this data). Based on these considerations, economics and biology were selected to offer a contrast in terms of disciplinary grouping (as a social science and pure science) and in typical financial returns. Many other subject pairings would also have fulfilled these criteria and additional, practical factors shaped the final choice of these subjects:

- Strongly vocational subjects were avoided (such as dentistry or law), as these vary from the standard bachelors degree format and are more likely to be influenced by national variations in working structures or pay. Vocationally specific courses are also likely to lead to narrower discussions on the value of a degree compared to 'general' degrees, where students could be expected to have a wider range of plans, including further study or various careers.
- The selected subjects are relatively neutral in terms of culture/the potential for strong national perspectives. Subjects likely to involve more significant cultural variation, such as history, were avoided, as were language courses which likely have quite different significance in England and Norway in terms of students' future options.
- A final check involved comparing descriptions of bachelor level courses based on the prospectuses of target institutions, to see that course structures were similar. For example, as physics is offered as a stand-alone degree at UCL, but only as a joint degree (with astronomy) at UiO, it was excluded.

Sampling institutions and students:

While contrasting subject areas were chosen strategically, both the institutions and individual students were selected to offer as good a basis for comparison as possible. The University of Oslo (UiO) was chosen as a site for Norwegian interviews, partly due to the practical advantage it offers as the author's home institution, for recruiting participants. University College London (UCL) was selected as a good comparator to UiO: both area highly-regarded,

traditional universities with broad subject ranges; both are in the heart of capital cities; and both are leading research institutions as well as strong teaching institutions.

In recruiting students, limits were set to see that those taking part are broadly similar in each country, again to support a comparative analysis between the two countries. These limits are set out below (table 4) along with the actual composition of groups (in italics). As this makes clear, while most of the sampling structure was maintained, several concessions had to be made. There were extensive challenges in recruiting. Despite careful planning, a great deal of publicising and promoting participation and ensuring it was easy and convenient for students to participate it was very hard to get people to take part. Due to this, some recruitment criteria were relaxed, for a handful of participants (fees and length of break before starting a degree). The other major concession was that the Economics ‘group’ in London is in fact composed of a very small group (3) supplemented by two depth interviews.

Table 4: overview of sample plan and actual groups (in italics)

	Biology Students (low return pure science)	Economics Students (high return social science)
England: (UCL)	Group 1 - 8 <i>participants (3M, 5F)</i> - <i>one with 4 years out</i> - <i>one studying joint degree (Biomedicine & Biol.)</i>	Group 2 - 5 <i>participants (2M, 3F)</i> - <i>one studying joint honours (Economics & Geography) and with no loan.</i>
Norway: (UiO)	Group 3 - 8 <i>participants (4M, 4F)</i> - <i>one with 3 years out</i> - <i>one no loan</i>	Group 4 - 6 <i>Participants (2M, 6F)</i> - <i>One had changed degree after a year</i> - <i>One with no loan</i>
Participants should be:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In their first year of a full-time degree • Have come into university with no more than one year’s break since leaving secondary education • Be in receipt of standard financial support⁸ • Be native citizens of the country they are studying in 	
Groups to include	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aim for 6: minimum of 3 and up to 8 • At least two participants of each gender per group 	

⁸ Defining standard financial support is taken here to simply mean that all students are to be in receipt of a student loan, (including those receiving a means-tested loan in England) as in both countries the vast majority of students do receive loans (See Vossentyn 2004, as cited in Booij et al., 2009).

Mini-groups: detailed methodology and discussion guide

Four mini-group discussions (each with 4-8 participants) were conducted, involving a total of 27 participants. Attitudes and perceptions were investigated in discussions covering why they were pursuing a degree, the general benefits of HE, the factors that influenced their decision to seek a degree and their expectations about the impact their degree will have on their future opportunities and outcomes. Questions and prompts were built into the guide to address the research questions, the hypothesis and theoretically generated frames and cross-cutting tensions. The discussion guide and stimulus materials (see appendices 4 -7) were designed to cover the key concerns of this study, and probe for students' views on a range of levels and from various perspectives, drawn from the operationalisation of value and background reading. Issues such as how far students consider value in intrinsic or instrumental terms, or in terms of benefits for themselves (individual level) or wider society/knock-on benefits (collective level) were included. A narrative approach (see 3.4.1) was also useful in developing the guide; activities and prompts were built in to encourage participants to consider and clarify the narratives of value that are familiar to them or that influenced their own choices (see appendices 4-6). This created space for discussions to move back and forth between personal experiences (for example in choice of degree subject) and much broader ideas about the general importance of HE. Exercises such as the warm-up cartoon (see appendix 6) encouraged the group to think quite spontaneously and break the ice, as everyone was encouraged to add some comment early on. The cartoon format was also a way to encourage 'headline' or quite broad ideas, which were a useful starting point to get a sense of the overall range of views in the group. Importantly, they also provide an opportunity for individuals to record their attitudes, relatively free of group influence.

Short individual exercises were also built into the group discussions, to allow more personal perspectives to emerge and stimulate discussions. The overall flow of the discussion was designed to remain as open as possible initially, to investigate what issues are raised spontaneously, and importantly, how they are raised. A description of one section illustrates the way these elements of individual expression were built in, and the flow from open discussion to more targeted points: in the 'what kind of benefits' section of the guide (appendices 4 & 5) students were given three Post-It notes, and asked to note down on each the three main benefits/main advantages they thought getting a degree or going to university would bring. These post-its provided a quick map of the overall range of views. The

following discussion allowed students to explain their choices, how they framed them and prioritise between them (examples of a complete set of notes can be found in appendix 8). The Post-It responses also were used to justify the flow of discussion – popular issues were discussed first (using the pre-planned prompts in the guide devised for different themes/values about HE). After this participant-led discussion, areas in the guide which had not been spontaneously raised were prompted on.

Other practical concerns in planning the groups:

The guide was piloted with two Norwegian and two English students before fieldwork took place. This was important to check the questions effectively addressed the study questions but also to check it worked as a reasonably balanced and effective tool in both national settings. These pilots provided some feedback on ambiguous language/terms, ideas for changes to the structure and suggested improvements to the wage estimates exercise, where the initial wording was unclear.

The organization/venues for groups were arranged to make participation as appealing and comfortable as possible, both to encourage students to take part and to put them at ease during discussions. Times were identified which would be convenient (most around lunchtime, one early evening), all immediately after a lecture. Comfortable, private rooms were then arranged with the help of course administrators, within the immediate vicinity of the lecture venues. Food and drinks were also provided. Students were informed about the events in several stages: e-mails were sent by course administrators, flyers were distributed at lectures and individuals were approached before and after lectures. In Group 1, despite this preparation being in place, the targeted lecture was cancelled, and as the meeting room was not booked until later, the group was convened at the last minute, in a student cafeteria with a fairly private, quiet table.

As Norwegian discussion groups were to be conducted in English, it was important to guard against a language barrier or misinterpretation. Although the vast majority of Norwegian university students speak English fluently, a Norwegian masters student acted as collaborator in the Norwegian groups, helping with recruitment on the day and available throughout groups to provide clarification and translation. This was useful in a handful of instances, and participants were encouraged at the start of groups to switch into Norwegian if they needed to (see the intro for the Oslo discussion guide). The Norwegian collaborator was also helpful in

brainstorming observations immediately after the Norwegian groups, again helping to guard against an English bias in interpretation.

3.4 Analytical approach and processes

A challenge is posed by the theoretical approach taken in this study: it involves looking for and explaining how a sense of overall value in HE is constructed in each nation, across different dimensions and levels. A narrative approach is helpful in doing this, and offers scope to find links between these more micro and macro levels of value construction (section 2.2).

Analytical approach: narratives and frames for value

As stated in the overall research strategy this study attempts to bridge between more objective and subjective perspectives on the value of a degree. This has implications for the analytical approach taken. There are two broad ways we make sense of the world around us, the rational or scientific and the narrative or story based (Bruner, 1996; Postman, 1995). When using rational or scientific approaches, we try to find relevant information, weigh it up and decide what it all adds up to in a dispassionate, technical way. This is often presented as the least biased or best way to understand phenomena. However in a complex, unpredictable world we also engage with issues that we have limited information on or cannot be understood in their entirety. In such situations we draw on narrative understanding, taking issues or events and linking them into a chronological form or applying larger frames of meaning to them to interpret and order them (Lieblich, 1998). Ideas such as framing can help to clarify how such narrative approaches are developed and how different sets of meanings compete for dominance and support, in terms of how people interpret and make sense of reality (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005). These frames are collective understandings that come to be widely held across a society, or indeed across many societies. When we ‘frame’ our understanding of a situation we link it to broader norms and stories we are already familiar with, from our wider cultural and social context. In this way, the way we interpret and ascribe meaning to education is hard to understand in isolation from the wider environment around it (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005). Importantly (for this study) these approaches assume people combine both objective or structural factors, and more subjective, normative factors or values in these decisions. Narrative analysis, as applied in this study, assumes we are storytellers as much as rational actors by nature, and that the stories we tell, in policy or in discussions, draw on facts but

make sense of them through blending them with normative and subjective frames (Liblich et al., 1998).

From a narrative perspective, the creation of value in education is not solely about measureable outcomes or processes, but these factors matter, alongside more discursive struggles and conflicts, where interpretations of HE compete for dominance on the societal level and in individual opinion forming. The frames and narratives that prove enduring and influential will tend to require a high degree of congruence with more objective elements of the world around them if they are to be coherent, convincing and influential or individual or collective views and behaviours. Fiss and Hirsch sum up this pragmatic settlement explaining that this kind of analytic approach “acknowledges the role of structural factors” in while leaving room for more symbolic, cultural, and political influences on meaning to be considered. (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005:31).

The analytical approach taken in this study is closely tied to the research questions and the theoretical perspectives. These required different types and sources of data and information to be drawn together, and the complexity of those sources and the questions asked meant a strong analytical framework was vital. The narrative framework (see 2.2) maps key ideas about value in HE, and tries to break these down in terms of cross-cutting tensions, and their implications for the individual in terms of benefits received from a degree level and collective level of value to the state. This is used to synthesise and analyse the data and develop conclusions. Indeed, while many aspects of research and analysis involve breaking down meaning, categorising and identifying oppositions (all of which are important in this study) a narrative approach emphasises that the meaning generated across categories can create a more meaningful and robust picture: it encourages a consideration of how different, ideas work together to build up a coherent, influential narrative about value (Liblich, 1998).

Key steps in analysis for the separate strands

The more practical aspects of this analysis were based on a logical, step-wise process: each strand being considered independently, and then brought together in a process of triangulation. The frames developed from the theoretical discussion (intrinsic/cultural, economic/instrumental and social/instrumental) and cross-cutting tensions will provide an analytical tool for all three strands. It is accepted that these narratives and themes are a significant simplification of the full range of issues, but they are used throughout as a

heuristic or tool, to clarify complex issue and bring coherence to the analysis. This helped ensure that at the stage of triangulation, the research question of ‘How far do these sources illustrate congruence or discordant ideas about the value of a degree’ could be addressed.

Table 5: Summary of theoretically generated analytical framework

Frame/narrative on the value of HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual/cultural narratives • Self-development narratives • Economic/vocational narratives • Welfare state/ mobility narratives
Cross cutting tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrinsic values (HE as primarily an end in itself) vs. instrumental values (HE as a means to something else) • Value/benefits are individual/private vs. value/benefits are collective/shared

Analysing group discussions

The mini groups were digitally recorded and full, anonymised transcript produced (participants were identified by a code based only on gender and participant number). These transcripts, along with field notes and participants’ exercises, were analyzed through a category forming and refining approach based initially around the discussion guide segments: overall themes and patterns were developed, then broken down into more fine grained distinctions or re-grouped to offer a clear, balanced summary of the views that emerge. This process has been strongly influenced by the approaches described by Patton (2002) and Kvale & Brinkman (2009). This analytical process involved repeated, detailed reading of the transcripts and also the development of an analysis matrix (in Excel) summarising the issues raised by topic in each group. This made comparison across groups clearer and more rigorous. Additional categories or perspectives generated during analysis of transcripts were built into the matrix and be then reapplied on later readings of the transcripts. The unit of analysis followed the discursive or framing approach: comments were analyzed where they expressed a perspective on the value of HE, they therefore can be quite long discussions, or short statements. The analysis was informed by the excellent discussion of analysis issues, pitfalls and procedures offered by Vicsek (2010), who notes that group phenomena are an important potential influence, and need to be considered in planning, conducting and analysing groups. The interactive format of the groups, for all the advantages it brings, can also lead to problems of conformity. It takes onboard Vicsek’s recommendation to take the group context into account, as well as overall opinions, in discussions of findings.

Synthesis and connections

The findings from each of the three strands are summarised at the end of each chapter to clearly address key research questions and cross-cutting themes. As stated above, while the study used the theoretical framework on value to guide analysis, the synthesis stage offered an opportunity to challenge this model and see if it fitted with the evidence found across the three research strands. The frames do offer a broadly useful way to conceptualize and summarize differences in attitudes, and help to highlight areas of congruence or tension in the ways value is depicted in each country. However, there are aspects which are less of a neat fit, and these are highlighted in the conclusions. As Patton notes, one advantage of triangulation is that where inconsistencies emerge in findings, this is not a problem, as it both raises opportunities to check if findings are credible, but also can illuminate important issues that are not neatly explained by any stand-alone approach (Patton, 2002). Overall, the model was a useful heuristic, for a broad, complex subject. The simple approach of cross-cutting tensions (intrinsic/instrumental values and individual/collective orientation) proved, in many ways, to be a more powerful and adaptable (across the different strands) way of organising themes and highlighting differences. The analytical process was expected to, and did involve, some adjusting of, and challenges to, the theoretical framework.

3.5 Limitations of the research approach

The analytical process is therefore strongly determined by the analytical approach and hypothesis of the study. While this is useful to ensure focus and compatibility across the various strands and sources, this quite focused approach does involve the risk that the theoretical frames and hypothesis become assumptions that are too influential. Such tools can be misused and the data be pushed to fit the framework, instead of the framework being re-structured around the data. This is mitigated in two ways. Firstly, the initial frames and hypothesis are explicitly stated to be just that, and they are as valuable to this study if they are rejected or found to be inadequate at expressing students' attitudes as they are if they fit well with them. Their role is to help to uncover and clarify the lines of national contrast and similarity. Secondly, the mixed methodology allows different strands to be sense checked against one another – it is harder to misinterpret three totally different kinds of data all in the same way, triangulation helps to highlight different perspectives and offers several chances to pick up on themes or issues that might be missed in one area alone.

3.5.1 Issues of validity and reliability

There are two aspects of validity to be considered in a mixed research model: the validity of the approaches and methods used in each strand, and the overall validity of the research strategy and its findings. The first involves ensuring good quality data; the second involves developing, robust conclusions and inferences from that data (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002). Various definitions of validity has been defined for quantitative and qualitative approaches, but fundamentally it involves concerns that research should use measures and methods appropriate to the research topic and questions, accurately describe what has been found/observed in a study and that findings and conclusions are presented to take account of the degree of generalisability or transferability that can reasonably be ascribed to them, based on the study's limitations (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002).

In terms of the specific strands, the issue of validity in strands 1 & 2 is largely addressed by using robust and appropriate secondary sources. As strand 3 is based on primary, qualitative research more extensive considerations of validity and reliability are appropriate, as Lincoln and Guba emphasise, these issues need to be considered during planning, fieldwork and analysis (1985, 1984, as cited in Bryman, 2008). As a small-scale qualitative study, the external validity or generalisability of the findings from strand 3 are weak, and the sample is not representative of all bachelors students. Instead, a purposive sample has been developed, to maximise variation across subject areas, but minimise variation in individual student characteristics. This strengthens the usefulness of the findings for a comparative national analysis.

Across the whole study, general principles that support good quality research as well as reliability and validity, appropriate in either quantitative or qualitative studies have been considered (Bryman, 2008).

- **Credibility:** an advantage of this research project is that the multiple perspectives on value offer multiple accounts of the issue studied, and the process of triangulation across these supports the validity of findings and strengthens the basis for explanatory conclusions.
- **Making limitations transparent:** Where the study is limited in terms of its generalisability or where sub-optimal approaches were used, this has been clearly recorded and explained. This ensures that the conclusions are fair and their relevance and implications are presented in a balanced way.

- Analytical approach and hypothesis made explicit and open to challenge: while a strong analytical framework will be used as a tool to guide the project, it is at all stages open to alteration or rejection.
- Reflexivity: I am aware that my initial interest in this subject was sparked by a sense that English students might have increasingly ‘instrumental’ or economically focused views of HE. It was apparent that sampling was a risk area, where a bias towards certain views on value could easily have been created (if subject selection or patterns of return had not been considered). There is also an unavoidable degree of bias involved when an English person conducts a comparison between England and Norway, of culturally-shaped expectations and interpretations. The discussion guide pilots and presence of a Norwegian collaborator in the Oslo groups were important steps that minimised this issue, although it doubtless is an influence.

In summary then, the study provides a good basis for drawing inferences and conclusions about differences between the two countries, and for tentative explanations of these differences based on the three research strands. However, the findings are limited in terms of generalisability, as strand three in particular is based on a narrow and small sample.

3.5.2 Ethical considerations

The study does not involve particularly sensitive issues or participants from vulnerable groups. The main ethical concerns relevant in this study concern the responsible management of personal data, such as participants contact details and names, collected during recruitment. All such information was securely stored and participants’ views anonymised. In terms of the acknowledged responsibility to make research as transparent to participants as possible, all those who took part were offered, and asked to receive, a short summary of findings.

4 Strand 1: Comparative overview of national HE policy and funding

This strand sets out how the value of a degree has been depicted in recent policy. It seeks to identify national differences or evidence of convergence, and explore how the value of HE to the individual and society is constructed through policy rhetoric and funding approaches. In doing so it will consider how priorities about the role and impact of HE systems are presented, but also how they are framed by larger ideas and trends. Education policies can be seen as a mix of subjective and objective elements: policy texts contain formal national visions and measureable goals, but are also outcomes of, and contributors to, narratives and discourses (Ball, 2008). The degree to which national policy changes reflect changes in the narratives about HE value are discussed at the end of this chapter.

The chapter draws extensively on Kogan et al.'s (2006) comparative analysis of HE in Norway, Britain and Sweden. This offers a robust overview of HE developments in each country, from the post-war years up to 2005. This is supplemented by Schwarzenberger et al.'s (2008) analysis of national funding systems, as well as a range of additional sources on each country. A brief overview of post-war development is provided as a background, as aspects of the changes in this period remain relevant today. Recent reforms and funding approaches are then compared in more detail, focusing on changes in the UK⁹ from the time Labour came to power in 1997 and in Norway since the Quality reform agenda began in 2001. The comparison reveals common processes at work in the two countries, as well as important differences in how these have been built into HE systems and have effected value.

4.1 Establishing mass HE systems

The decades after the Second World War saw a rapid expansion of HE in many countries (Trow, 2005). In both Norway and the UK, expansion began in earnest during the 50's and 60's when rising social expectations and economic demand combined to start a shift towards mass systems (Kogan et al., 2006:31) This period saw a strong consensus behind welfare state policies and extensive social changes linked to egalitarian ideals. All of this contributed to

⁹ The study by Kogan et al. (2006) addresses UK wide changes, although the Labour government introduced new devolved powers for the UK regions which lead to greater diversity in HE, particularly regarding funding.

demand for, and support for, more HE places and generous public funding; both countries sought to expand HE (Kogan et al., 2006). New universities were established steadily in Britain from the 50's on. In Norway, the Kleppe Commission began expansion of existing institutions in Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim during the 60's (Fägerlind and Strömqvist, 2004). However, these attempts to stretch traditional structures could not keep pace with demands for more and new kinds, of HE.

By the early 60's critiques of traditional HE systems as elitist, and demands for greater social mobility led to the introduction of new forms of HE and binary systems emerged in each country. In Britain the 1963 Robbins Report emphasised the role of HE in fostering the 'good society' through more equal opportunities as well as supporting the national need for more technical skills (Wolf, 2010). In response 30 new Polytechnics, focusing on technical and professional training were established by the mid 70's (Scott, 2007). In Norway the 1965 Ottosen Commission initially recommended expansion be achieved by simply building more universities, but students and academics resisted this pressure to become more vocational and socially useful and instead a large number of new regional colleges were established for professional training between 1966 and 1970 (Fägerlind and Strömqvist, 2004).

These new binary systems broadened the functions expected from HE and accelerated massification. However, a divide was clear between institutions focused on professional or technical qualifications and those focused on traditional academic, liberal education and research. While this led to increased stratification and a sense of hierarchy between these types of HE institutions, the period also saw priority placed on the social dimensions of higher education. In particular HEs role in social mobility was emphasised, leading to support for generous state funding for institutions and students. (Kogan et al., 2006). By the late 80's and early 90's both binary systems came under pressure. In Norway the binary divide was eroded following the Hernes Commission in 1988, and was further weakened by a series of decisions into the 90's. Colleges were given the right to develop research-based degrees, hire professors and engage in fundamental research. Universities and colleges were eventually brought under a common law in 1995 (Nyborg, 2007). In the UK the boundary between different types of HE was removed in 1992's Further and Higher Education Act, which allowed Polytechnics to apply for university status and take on traditional university roles in teaching and research (Scott, 2007). The 1992 Act also created new, national, quality-assessment and funding

structures, in particular the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)¹⁰. These mergers marked a second burst of reform and growth in the two countries, which continued through 1990s. As unified HE systems were established, new national bodies and more detailed and centralised policies were developed, which made HE systems more ‘steerable’ by central government, these process continue to be relevant today.

Kogan et al. argue that these steps towards mass HE up to the 90’s demonstrate the recognition in both the countries that “higher education was of great socio-economic significance and ought to be exploited as a way of achieving major political goals” (2006:4). However, they also note that what the major HE goals were seen to be changed significantly. In the 60’s and 70’s HE was strongly framed by social dimensions, as a driver of mobility and a welfare benefit but by the 80’s and 90’s was being presented as “a necessary tool, and resource in international economic competition” (Kogan et al., 2006:5). This shift reflected wider political changes: increasing scepticism towards the welfare state in general (a backlash that was particularly sharp in the UK), and rising interest in new policy approaches, such as New Public Management (NPM) that prioritised efficiency and accountability (Kogan et al. 2006). The more recent policy analysis demonstrates that many of these processes and ideas continue to play a part in more contemporary HE reforms.

4.2 Contemporary English HE policy

Although the Labour Government that took power in 1997 has only recently left office, a great deal has already been written about the nature of their reforms agenda and approach to education. Indeed, their approach to education has drawn significant comment, centred on the perception that although Labour occupy the left-of-centre political territory in the UK, they pursued education and HE policies highly consistent with those set in motion by the previous right-of centre government. This continuity with previous reforms was most evident than in changes in HE funding and introduction of student fees. O’Leary (2007) sees this as the defining feature of recent HE policy and a change that has caused enormous controversy amongst politicians, academic and the public. Further defining features of Labour policy have been their use of globalisation rhetoric to frame the need for HE changes, and a tendency to define social and education policies in the language and values of economics (Ball, 2008)

¹⁰ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1992/Ukpga_19920013_en_1.htm

Fees and private returns to HE

Up until the 1980's Britain's per student spending was high by European standard, but it was cut back rapidly in the 80's and most of the 90's, while most other EU countries maintained or increased spending (Wolf: 2002a). By the time Labour took office HE funding was in crisis (Lundt, 2008). The outgoing Conservative government has set up the Dearing commission to investigate options for funding, although it has been suggested its task was simply to find a politically acceptable way to introduce fees (Lundt, 2008). The commission's recommendation was that state grants and loans be replaced with means tested loans, to be repaid after graduation. The government discussed this option and the alternative of introducing a graduate tax, but instead chose a stronger form of cost-sharing, in a private loan system and up-front fees. Arguments for the introduction of fees relied heavily on the higher lifetime wages of degree holders, stressing the private financial value of HE and setting a direction of travel towards even greater cost-sharing (O'Leary, 2008). Fees were initially capped at £1,000 a year but have been gradually increased and in 2004 variable 'top-up fees' were introduced, strengthening market mechanisms in HE (Kogan et al., 2006). Details of the contemporary funding system are summarised later in this chapter (section 4.4).

Prominence for the economic role of HE

A broad range of academic, social and economic roles was set out for HE in the Robbins report in the 60's; in the 90's Dearing proposed that the aim should be for HE "to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilise, inclusive society" (Wolf, 2010). These broad aspirations have become less prominent; since 1997 HE has been presented as a primarily economic issue, linked to the necessity to build a competitive knowledge economy and framed by an ever more competitive global environment. The UK government used knowledge economy and globalisation rhetoric extensively to justify policy changes and frame the importance of HE, as illustrated by a speech in 2005 by Prime Minister Tony Blair:

"I hear people say we have to stop and debate globalisation. You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer. They're not debating it in China and India. They are seizing its possibilities, in a way that will transform their lives and ours... The character of this changing world is indifferent to tradition. Unforgiving of frailty. No respecter of past reputations. It has no custom and practice. It is replete with opportunities, but they only go to those swift to adapt, slow to complain, open, willing and able to change"(Blair, 2005).

Policies have built in assumptions that HE must therefore become more directly work-related and employer-focused, due to this international environment, requiring more graduates with

flexible, transferable skills (DfES, 2003). This re-alignment towards economic functions is also illustrated by the reorganisations of government departments for HE. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) was created in June 2007, merging the functions of the Department of Education and Skills and of the Department of Trade and Industry. Just two years later DIUS was merged into a new 'super ministry', the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Both moves drew criticism from academics that the academic and traditional role of HE was being sidelined, and that no government department retains the words 'education' or 'universities' in its title (Curtis, 2009).

New powers for steering: funding and quality assessment

These changes in funding and role of HE mark a substantial break with tradition. As Kogan et al. (2006) note, HE had long been seen as primarily providing for knowledge production and this was assumed to require a high degree of autonomy. Public funding for HE institutions and student grants had supported the expansion of HE and even though this positioned HE as an "emanation of the welfare state" it remained well removed from the state and civil service, certainly more so than in Norway; an arrangement that can be summed up as the 'private government of public money' (Kogan et al., 2006:43). However, a 'heroic' tendency has become more evident in HE policy, with government pushing through changes not just in HE functions but in values (Kogan et al., 2006). The autonomous-academic and welfare state traditions have both been weakened due to increased government control and new market mechanisms. The introduction of the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) in 1992 marked the end of the 'benevolent', autonomous relationship between the state and HE and changed how funding was allocated to universities (Kogan et al., 2006). HEFCE is a non-government body, but is responsible for implementing a role and strategic goals defined by government, most recently in 2004's White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education'¹¹. Funding from HEFCE is determined by student intake but also research quality, which is assessed in a way that allows more government steering of HE priorities. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) system was introduced in the mid 80's, to great criticism from academics, and have been carried out roughly every 5 years (most recently in 2001 and 2008). Research quality is assessed via strictly delimited submissions from departments which provide the basis for a public research ranking.

¹¹ See HEFCE's website, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/history>.

These rankings are widely publicised and used in league tables which are seen as driving competition and stratification in teaching and research (Kogan et al., 2006). Partly due to ongoing criticism from academics a new Research Excellence Framework has been developed (to take place from 2012). However, this does not resolve problems regarding the ‘one size fits all’ approach to research quality, or concerns that academic freedom is undermined as academics must demonstrate narrow, measurable, economic impacts of their work¹². In late 2009 the government announced a sharp reduction in HE funding would take place from 2010 due to the economic crisis and HEFCE was asked to devise new measures that “provide significant incentives to enhance the economic and social impact of research”(Morgan, 2009). This suggests central steering through funding and research assessment may strengthen in the coming years. Overall, these new bodies for oversight and assessment have increased government’s ability to set priorities and define quality, allowed HE goals to be set with less academic consultation and strengthened market mechanisms (Kogan et al. 2006).

Increased stratification and hierarchy

The RAEs have also arguably provided a way to rationalise stratification, marking out an elite group within a unified system and driving increased variation in quality and status (Kogan et al. 2006). Stratification has also been encouraged by elements of New Public Management (NPM), policies defined by Power (1997) as applying private sector principles to public services, which clearly fit with the use of oversight in steering HE and the quasi-market supported by RAEs, student fees and later variable fees. However, such stratification leads to problems in terms of the role of HE in social mobility. Brennan notes that since removing the binary divide, the UK has a more hierarchical system than ever: *“A small number of elite research universities sit at the apex of the system. They not only dominate research production in most fields and receive funding which seems lavish to those in less-favoured institutions, but they play a key role in the identification and reproduction of political, economic and cultural elites in British society.” (Brennan 2007:32).*

Reconciling excellence, efficiency and equity

Labour did talk about the role HE could play in social mobility and set out a new ‘widening participation agenda’ to increase HE attendance overall, and particularly amongst those from

12 For an illustration of these concerns amongst academics see an open letter from 45 leading academics, published in the Times higher Education, 29th April 2009. ‘Only scholarly freedom delivers real ‘impact’’. www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comments.asp?storycode=408984

non-typical backgrounds (O’Leary, 2007). A range of initiatives were launched: the Office of Fair Access (OFFA) was established to oversee admissions policy and some means-tested grants were reintroduced alongside higher fees (in 2006). However, these have been criticised as largely symbolic, not effective steps (Lundt, 2008). Indeed, a pattern has persisted since the 1990’s where additional university places are disproportionately taken up by the more affluent, undermining HE’s role in mobility (Thomson, 2003). Cohort studies of British children born between 1958 and 2000 and show that “family circumstances had an increasing effect on life chances as the post-war decades advanced” (Wolf, 2002a). Indeed Wolf argues that claims that a mass university system in the UK is leading to a fairer or more mobile society are misleading, and instead the increased emphasis on university level education “locks-in” advantages for the middle-classes, in universities and careers (Woolf, 2002a).

This failure to tackle access to HE, despite rapid expansion and initiatives targeting those from non-traditional backgrounds has been linked back to the way policy has framed the role and value of HE. Wolf (2002a) argues the social and welfare roles for HE have been sidelined by economic roles and the values of the marketplace (Wolf, 2002). Ball describes a policy context where “social and educational policies are collapsed into economic and industrial policy [and] social justice concerns seem peripheral” (Ball, 2008:149). Indeed there seem to be strong tensions within Labour policies: to expand HE, while constraining public costs, widening participation and maintaining ‘top-flight’ research. Quality has been accommodated in an expanded system by allowing increased stratification, with a clearer and more fixed hierarchy emerging between elite institutions and the rest. Where trade-offs had to be made, social mobility and improving access seemed to have lost-out to economic concerns and values. Seldon notes that the Labour’s policies addressed social justice not by aiming to reduce inequality or poverty, but in terms of individual opportunity to compete for success (2008:411). This aligns well with decisions to raise fees, while also claiming to wish to widen access. Brennan argues that the tangle of aims and policies has seen HE take on the sorting function previously conducted by secondary schools, a process inevitably strengthened and accelerated by variable fees (Brennan, 2007). This focus on efficiency above other factors is also evident in government support for flexible study programs, and shorter degrees, with a two-year bachelor being suggested as a way to save students money, and increase graduate numbers alongside the substantial cost in HE spending expected in the coming years (Shepherd, 2010).

International influence in ideology

These re-alignments of HE policy have been supported by, and linked to influential ideas from the international level, drawing heavily on the threats and opportunities posed by globalisation and the knowledge economy concept promoted across Europe. Bologna processes required minimal changes in English HE structures. In the UK a similar qualifications frameworks and credit systems were already the norm before Sorbonne¹³. Indeed recent English HE reforms can arguably be seen as being driven more powerfully by national reviews of policy, as found in the Dearing Report or The Future of Higher Education White paper, than European agreements (Witte, 2006). Labour's policy approach drew on globalisation ideas and international trends, evident in assumptions that the crucial role of HE was to develop a knowledge economy and the introduction of cost-sharing. The aim of becoming a leading knowledge economy was central to the European agenda (see 1.4) and in national policy from the 1998 White Paper 'Our Competitive Future, Building the Knowledge Driven Economy' onwards. Ball (2008) argues that globalization rhetoric and ideas promoted by organisation such as the OECD and European Council were widely used as inspiration and rationales for education policies, and these positioned HE first and foremost as a lever for the state to establish competitive international market (Ball, 2008).

4.3 Contemporary Norwegian education policy

Kogan et al. (2006) see HE policy shifts in Norway from the late 1990's centred around two issues: internationalization and quality. The so-called Quality Reform encompassed these concerns and set the direction for change in the Norwegian system from 2001 onwards. This followed from concerns about quality and the international position of Norwegian HE, in part due to less favourable international comparisons and measures, including low RoRs, which were widely seen as signalling problems in the HE system (Hægeland et al., 1999). These reforms addressed varied aims: to increase the quality of HE teaching and research, reduce student drop-out rates and study delays, increase study progression and implement the Bologna process. The Quality Reform agenda was updated and reinforced by a more recent government commission, the Stjernø Commission, which reported in 2008, and focused on concerns with quality, efficiency and international competitiveness (Correa, 2008).

¹³ Though not in all universities; the Scottish HE system in particular had long used a different degree structure.

Balancing the international and national agendas

From the late 1990's HE reforms were linked to international processes, particularly Bologna. Fägerlind and Strömqvist (2004) suggest Norway's eagerness to engage with the international agenda was driven by a desire to become more competitive in internationalising HE markets and stronger in teaching and research. Bologna policies were rapidly implemented: new qualification structures were introduced in 2003-2004, with a bachelors, masters, and PhD structure replacing Norway's structure of a 'cand.mag. degree' of 3-4 years, leading on to a 1-2 year masters 'hovedfag'; Norway also adopted the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and emerged as one of the leaders in Bologna implementation (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004). However, these reforms did not reflect a straightforward acceptance of international priorities. The Quality Reforms had been preceded by a national HE review (the Mjøs commission, 1998), which concluded that national HE improvement would be supported by more institutional autonomy and internationalisation, which would involve taking on standard European HE structures (Nyborg, 2002). This national agenda overlapped with the substantive features of the Bologna process and when a new Social Democratic government came to power in 2000 these compatible agendas were brought together under the Quality Reforms 2002-2003.

However, beyond Bologna there are signs of increasing international links. International themes, such as a stronger emphasis on a competitive research position, a new focus on HE's role in the knowledge economy and more market-like policy approaches all reflected international trends and seemed to pull away from national traditions (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004). While Norway is not an EU member it has signed up to other European processes, including elements of the Lisbon HE agenda such as Open Method of Coordination (OMC) groups for collective action on research and education. However, Gornitzka (2006) has observed that Norway has handled such links quite cautiously and maintains some distance from the broader agenda and normative influence of Lisbon; while taking part in the OMC groups, Norway tends to only implement changes and adopts goals where they align with existing national priorities. Maasen et al. (2008) note that the approach to fulfilling the Bologna processes demonstrated an awareness that efforts are also needed to maintain and protect the diversity and institutional autonomy of the national HE system. Norway has actively worked within international structures and processes, where they align with national views, while keeping at 'arms' length from the broader European convergence agenda and influence. This fits well with Fägerlind & Strömqvist's (2004:31) assertion that while ideas of

globalisation and knowledge-based economic growth have impacted on the Nordic countries, HE systems remain 'predominantly shaped' by national ideas and decisions. However, pressures from the international level seem likely to increase and the concerns of developing a more competitive and internationalised role in teaching and research, and HE's role in fostering a knowledge economy were underlined by the Stjernø commission (Correa, 2008).

New buffer agencies for quality and centralised control

New approaches to government influence and control were sought to meet the Quality Reform aims of driving up quality and efficiency across the HE sector. This has been supported by new 'buffer agencies', particularly the new Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). NOKUT was established in 2003 to monitor and improve the quality of courses in HE nationally as well as to assess which institutions should receive university status. NOKUT's oversight role was largely based on monitoring new assurance systems for quality that all institutions had to develop and report on themselves. Their role and approach was adjusted somewhat in 2005 to bring all HE institutions under the same system, but also to take account of academic criticism and to increase institutional autonomy in governance structures (removing rules on governance structures introduced in earlier acts) (Kogan et al., 2006). Considerable efforts were made to standardize and centralise control of HE in these ways, changes which marked a significant shift in a system where the established role for central government had been largely related to macro issues of overall size and access (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004). However, the relationship between the state, NOKUT and institutions seemed to distribute power more widely than in many quality and assessment systems; Norway and other Nordic countries have tended to establish quality assurance systems typified by a relationship of trust between central government and HE institutions (Smeby, 1996 in Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004:29). The introduction of quality assurance processes and responsibility for quality have remained more in the hands of institutions and quality has been approached as an issue to be negotiated with institutions and academic units, at least in regards to teaching within HE (Nyborg 2002).

Institutional autonomy: new courses and variation in HE

These changes relate to wider steps taken to increase aspects of institutional autonomy. Various changes have acted to shift power between central government and institutions. The overall pattern does seem to have resulted in more institutional autonomy in many ways (Stensaker, 2010). However, the role for central government has changed to increase the potential for

steering, particularly through funding policies (see below). Quality Reform changes allowed institutions new freedoms to structure their own organisation and management more freely and allowed universities to introduce and develop new study programmes (Stensaker, 2010). Indeed part of the intention in introducing bachelors and masters courses was that they were expected to be provided through a wider range of institutions (universities and colleges) which would encourage a wider variety of programmes and “accommodate a wider range of individual, academic and labour market needs” (Nyborg 2002:14). These steps towards decentralisation were not only motivated by concerns for course variety, but were part of a broader “political belief” that decentralisation and variation in institutional offerings would produce more efficiency and effectiveness (Stensaker, 2010).

However, as in the UK, these shifts in power between institutions and central government seemed to build in more space for variation between courses and institutions. Unlike the UK, the increased institutional and course variation did not rapidly contribute to lead to a stronger, clearer hierarchy in terms of status. Kogan et al. (2006) therefore suggest new autonomy for individual institutions has provided a way of addressing the need for more variety in terms of specialism, approach, course and governance, without resulting in obvious stratification and undermining the national system. In part this seems due to HE traditions that have long sought to balance an emphasis on equality and a high degree of national consistency with more localised control. Throughout HE expansion, tendencies towards regionalisation were accompanied by steps to equalise institutional statuses (Kogan et al. 2006:172). As in the UK, policies presented in terms of increasing autonomy and institutional freedom had ambiguous impacts. Norwegian university leaders say some changes have strengthened central control, and certainly parliament seemed to have developed “an increasing willingness to interfere in rather detailed policy questions” (Kogan et al. 2006:43). The Stjernø recommendations also suggest that the balance of power between institutions and the centre will continue to be the focus for change, as mergers take place and the national system is re-shaped to better fit with overall national aims (Correa, 2008).

Funding, efficiency and a focus on HE outputs

A theme in Norwegian HE reforms which accompanied much of the quality agenda was a renewed focus on efficiency (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004). In particular a shift to

monitoring and incentivising results and outputs from HE, which was seen as vital to encouraging more efficiency (Stensaker, 2010). New incentives and stronger government influence over outputs were introduced along with significant changes in the funding system for institutions and students. These linked funding to increased performance in terms of HE outputs and impacts based around three components: a 'basic component', 'teaching component' and 'research component' (Nyborg, 2002). The rate of production of new graduates was particularly strongly emphasised in the 2002 quality reforms, and this aspect of the system was criticised by academics as too strict, and was later adjusted to place more emphasis on research (Kogan et al. 2006:45). Under these new policies a greater share of institutional budgets was linked to research and performance measures for research outputs (Stensaker, 2010). New incentives were also created for students by rewarding rapid progression and exam passes (see funding comparison, 4.4). These changes all facilitated a broader shift in Norwegian HE policy from oversight of macro features and control of HE inputs, to a focus on outputs and 'managing by results'. (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004).

Incremental and negotiated policy change

Fägerlind & Strömqvist suggest that the range of policies introduced from 2001 show that Norway was being influenced by international trends towards more functionalism and 'market thinking' in HE (2004:198). They argue these all reflect the uptake of New Public Management (NPM) approaches, and that these were the most influential import to Norwegian HE since the mid 1990's, building in assumptions that services should be steered via 'buffer agencies', governed more like corporate enterprises and managed by objectives (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004). While such NPM tendencies have clearly shaped HE reforms, Kogan et al. (2006) suggest their form and application is distinctive in Norway, due to being markedly 'more hesitant' than in many other countries, particularly the UK. The new approaches to establish output-based funding and targets, elements of market incentives and processes and to align with international agendas were tempered by the more incremental policy approach characteristic in Norwegian politics (Kogan et al. 2006). This is evident in the negotiation with academics and institutions during the reforms and a wider distribution of power in the new assessment systems. Despite being the most extensive reforms to HE in many years, the Quality Reforms were not forced through in the face of substantial conflict. Nyborg (2002) points out that while many academics were reluctant to see the degree structure change, at the institutional level there was widespread agreement; and, when it came to the more controversial aspect of the Quality reform, the basis on which state colleges could

apply to be universities, parliament voted to support the tougher recommendations favoured by academics, where colleges had to offer a wider range of Masters course and research training, not just bachelor level courses. While the implementation of these reforms has drawn some criticism from academics, it involved more negotiation and has been more incremental compared to the centrally driven and rapid policy change in the UK (Kogan et al. 2006). Again, broader political tendencies or policy styles seemed to play a part in shaping the way common trends or policies were applied.

Balancing new roles and HE traditions

The changes also seem to illustrate efforts to strike a balance between pressures to adjust to new ideas and approaches and established HE traditions. Norwegian universities were established as institutions for training for public service roles and could almost be seen as an extension of the civil service; the broader, liberal education began to gain strength after 1945, later followed by a strong set of ideas that positioned HE as a part of a comprehensive welfare state (Kogan et al. 2006:80). These roots remain influential. Fägerlind & Strömqvist (2004) define key features of a 'Nordic model' in HE which contrast to the British (and European) traditions: instead of powerful nation-state approaches, concerns for regional policy and social issues such as educational opportunity are emphasised, along with an assumption that HE is better governed by elected representatives than the market. These traditions also seem to persist in aspects of policy, particularly in funding approaches, that position the educational system as a tool of social engineering, as well as economic engineering (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004).

While changes brought by recent policies have aimed at major institutional reform and increased efficiency, these reforms also continued to re-iterate established roles, leading to a wide ranging system of influences and values in HE policy. The Quality Reform set out the aims and roles for HE in very broad terms, that include: offering everybody the possibility for personal development, developing common competences and culture, strengthening democracy and contributing to a critical dialogue, building social solidarity, educating candidates for industry, the social sector, education and research and contributing to international links (Nyborg, 2007). So far, economic arguments do not seem to have become the 'driving force' in HE policy initiatives and instead efforts are made to link these new concerns into the social, democratic and cultural roles of HE, without clarifying which ideas are dominant (Gornitzka & Maassen 2000).

4.4 National funding for degrees

Guy Neave warns that policy research too often treats policy statements as though they describe what will happen, when in fact policy marks both plans and action and a “symbolic aspect” (Neave, 2007). The symbolic aspect of policy is important for this study, and is emphasised in comparisons of how national policy rhetoric and reforms frame and re-construct value, but it is not the whole picture. It is important to consider a more concrete manifestation of each countries’ view on the value of HE, as offered by funding systems. These reflect where the balance lies between views about the private and social returns to education, and assumptions about how far individual benefits spillover to benefit society overall (see Barth as cited in Opheim, 2008). Opheim (2008) notes that views on where this balance of benefits lies may well have a major impact on educational policies, and in particular on funding decisions.

A study by Schwarzenburger et al. (2008) provides a useful overview of the approach being taken to cost sharing in Norway and England. It is particularly important as a resource alongside OECD indicators as it supplements standard measures of HE spending with often overlooked elements, such as tax exemptions (Schwarzenburger, 2007:129). Based on this a cost-sharing ratio can be estimated, summarising the overall balance of public and private funding in HE. This study identifies England (along with Spain) as spending considerably less from state sources than the other countries included (Norway, Czech Republic, Germany and the Netherlands). This provides a more detailed picture of how policy reflects a balance being struck between public and private investment in HE, and therefore views on how far HE is primarily a private or public benefit. As might be expected, when all forms of funding, subsidies and repayment structures are taken into account, the Norwegian state takes a considerably larger share of the cost of HE compared to England (see table 6). The key features of each country's funding system and policy changes are briefly discussed below. Key contrasts and implications about how views on the value of HE are revealed by the differing funding systems are also underlined.

Table 6: Summary of HE funding systems in Norway and England for degree level studies¹⁴

	Norway	England
Public/ private expenditure	Public: 52% Private: 47%	Public: 36% Private: 64%
Form of cost sharing	Mix of grants and loans	Fees and loans
Tuition Fees	None in public institutions (universities and University Colleges).	Yearly maximum fee for undergraduate courses, £3,225 (From 2009)
Loans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-means tested Student loans, (up to NOK 89 000 per year) • Maximum 8 years of financial aid. • Initially given as a loan, 40% may be converted to a grant if the student passes exams/after graduation. 	(For 2009/10) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Means-tested maintenance loan, (based on household/parental income) up to £2,906 • Non means-tested 'Tuition Fee Loan' between £3838 and £4950.
Repayment structure for loans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest free while studying. After graduation interest and per-annum charge effectively match inflation. • On completion, a proportion of loan converted to a grant (see below). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest rate matches inflation: real value maintained in line with inflation. • Repaid through tax system, once earning more than £15,000.
Grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Element of loan (up to 40%) converted to grant on completion of studies for all those living away from home. • Means tested grant element based on student's situation: receipt of benefits, earnings and assents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removed in 90's then replaced in 2004 with means-tested Higher Education Grant for increased fees. • Full grant of £1000 for those with low household income. • Means-tested Education Maintenance Grants up to £2,906 (household income >£25,000)

Table based on Schwarzenberger, 2008

HE funding in England

Cost-sharing in policies in England have been justified by large individual RoRs for degrees (as explored in section 5). The Dearing report that led to the introduction of fees estimated university to RoR of between 11-15% and relied on this figure to justify new student contributions¹⁵. In 2007 the government argued that even if fees were raised further, graduates additional lifetime earnings, estimated to be around £400,000, would dwarf these costs (Baker, 2007). The arguments clearly demonstrate a view of degrees as a long-term, individual investment. The introduction and subsequent increases in student fees were softened by a subsidised loan system, and fees were eventually made repayable after graduation. However, the initial decision to implement up-front fees, and later variable fees,

¹⁴ These summaries are based on standard funding for home students (not international students) and do not take account of targeted additional support for specific groups, such as those with disabilities. The details of data were updated using information from the Norwegian loan fund: <http://www.lanekassen.no> and information on the most recent fees and loans from the UK government portal <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en>

¹⁵ Full text of the Dearing Report available at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>

instead of suggested post-graduation loans or graduate tax seems to be designed to introduce market thinking and a consumer relationship into the student-university relationship (O’Leary, 2008). The loan system is means-tested based on parental income, and those from the least well off families can apply for grants (see table 6); this has been argued to create a fairer system, targeting the most needy (O’Leary, 2008). It is widely expected that the balance of costs will shift further towards students, through increased loans or fees. The government launched an independent review of HE funding in November 2009¹⁶ and commentators believe this will recommend fees be raised, potentially up to £7000 a year (Patton, 2009).

The UK is described by the OECD as part of a group of nations with HE systems defined by high tuition fees alongside well-developed student support: while fees are potentially barriers to entry, public subsidies attempt to counter-balance this. These countries’ entry rates are slightly above the OECD average although lower than the Nordic countries (OECD, 2009a). This approach to funding, and it’s complex evolution over recent years illustrates the struggle in England to push for simultaneous expansion and widened participation; increased contributions from students were accepted as the key change that could accomplish that, but the form of contributions chosen has proved profoundly controversial. The trajectory seems to be set for increased fees due to an established view of HE as an individual investment and high RoRs.

HE funding in Norway

Social mobility is a long-standing, explicit aim in Norwegian HE and this led to the establishment of Lånekassen (the state educational loan fund) in 1947. The objectives of Lånekassen today are “to remove inequality and promote equal opportunity, to ensure a satisfactory work environment for students and to ensure a steady supply of educated labour” (Opheim, 2008:20). The Norwegian funding system also demonstrates these values in the absence of fees and lack of means testing. The Quality Reform increased student support available via loans but at the same time, instead of offering a combination of a loan and grant ‘up front’ all funding available was to be provided as a loan, of which a proportion would be converted to a grant on completion of studies. This provided incentives for faster progression and completion rates, addressing central aims of the Quality Reform (Nyborg, 2002). These policies are based on the assumption that students are adults and financially independent of

¹⁶ The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2009. See <http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/>

their parents, implying “the costs of HE should be equal for students, regardless of their parents economic situation” (Opheim, 2008:18). The student support system is constructed to share costs between the individual and society, to reduce economic barriers to access and to continue to support social outcomes and equity (Opheim, 2008).

Norway remains an exception to the international trend to cost-sharing, and the 2003 reforms can be seen as a shift in the opposite direction, by standardising and increasing loan access to all students (Opheim, 2008). The OECD regards Norway as part of a small group of (mostly Nordic) countries, with no or low tuition fees but generous student support, who position HE access as a right and feature of a complete welfare state. In these countries public HE funding is “the operational expression of the weight attached to such deeply rooted social values as equality of opportunity and social equity” and the “notion that government should provide its citizens with tertiary education at no charge to the user is a prime feature of these countries’ educational culture” (OECD 2009a).

4.5 Comparison of national HE policies

Koget al. (2006) map out the broad sweep of changes taking place in both HE systems from the post-war period until around 2005: these involved ongoing massification, shifts in state-university relations, increased variation within systems and increasing demand for oversight and the ability to steer HE. While this led to common patterns and steps in policy in both countries Kogan et al. (2006:38) argue this does not necessarily signal convergence or a loss of national influence but “the natural evolution of systems once certain conditions were in place”. This comparison also shows that the priorities placed on various roles for HE, and the approach taken in implementing these changes and policies, varied considerably.

Many of the changes seem to flow from expansion: budgets rose and HE functions were diversified, making HE more relevant to more groups. Both HE systems became more politically salient, leading governments to seek new ways to steer systems and undermining autonomous academic traditions to varying extents (Kogan et al., 2006). Both countries saw new structures and processes for oversight and quality assurance. Although some power was decentralised to new buffer agencies and institutions themselves, power was centralised through new mechanisms to steer HE and set goals, a contradictory set of changes that fit well with the ‘evaluative state’ described by Neave (1988). Both countries took on elements of

NPM policy fashions, introducing mechanisms to make HE systems more responsive to demands from outside interests, including students and employers. However, while both governments pursued some similar policies these “came out differently” (Kogan et al. 2006:164). Changes seemed to be sharper in England, and were introduced with less negotiation with academic values or other HE traditions than in Norway.

In the case of quality and assessment policies, the shift was certainly less extreme in Norway. The far-reaching influence of quality assessment has been attributed to the way it strengthens power and authority for directing HE systems, while claiming to give more power away to institutions (Neave, 1998). Neave (1986) makes it clear that the power of quality policies is largely located in the ability to define what is valuable and important in HE and if this power is largely in the hands of central government (or buffer agencies who follow their direction) these mechanisms can facilitate major shifts in the functioning and symbolic values of education. The details of implementation, power distribution and political context are therefore critical in shaping the impact of quality systems. (Brennan, 1999, as cited in Stensaker, 2003). In England the government seemed to distrust the universities’ ability to monitor quality and imposing a detailed, central system. In Norway, although there are suggestions the new systems are influencing institutional behaviour and priorities to focus more on demonstrating research performance (Stensaker, 2010), the quality procedures were generally more flexible and details were decided more by the institutions (Kogan et al, 2006).

Brennan (2007) has suggested that the new quality and research policies make further stratification in English HE inevitably, and that this will create pressures for larger and more variable fees. Changes in incentives and assessment of HE have clarified the hierarchy and differences in status already in place (through league-tables) and these variations have been reinforced by new funding mechanisms. In contrast, increased variation amongst Norwegian institutions did not lead to such a clear hierarchy, and significant funding variation continued to be seen as incompatible with national consistency and quality.

Both countries seem to be deviating from European norms regarding funding, but in opposite directions. The UK has been depicted as moving towards a US style system of institutional hierarchy and variable, high fees (Kogan et al. 2006). Norway retains an unusually high proportion of state support and has introduced limited cost-sharing (Opheim, 2008). These differences in funding seem to illustrate quite different sets of ideas about the role and nature of HE. The English system builds in more market or consumer relationships and positions HE

as primarily a private benefit. The Norwegian system positions HE as a welfare right and builds in the assumption that individual and social benefits overlap, justifying a student contribution alongside state funding that incentivises completion. Johnston (2004) suggested that HE expansion inevitably leads to pressures for cost-sharing, but that different forms of cost-sharing are justified based on national context and dominant ideologies or principles (Johnstone, 2004). Norway and England seem to illustrate this: the values of universalism and egalitarianism retain more influence within Norway, while these have lost influence in England to values of competition and meritocracy.

Recent policies also demonstrate a wider range of roles and values at work in Norwegian rhetoric; the range of HE benefits and values set out in the Quality Reform have much more in common with English policy documents from the 60's (such as the Robbins Report) than those since 1997. One practical reason for this retention of broader HE roles and aims in Norway may be funding: annual HE spending has increased since the Quality Reform, based on an acceptance that increased quality costs more (Stensaker, 2010); in England, while the funding slump of the 80's and early 90's has been addressed through increased state and private funding, spending per student is still well below Norway (OECD, 2009a). However, the differences between these countries also seem to involve more subjective factors and differences in context including the different HE traditions in each country; contrasting political and ideological contexts; and, different responses to international pressures and globalisation.

English academic traditions developed within a hierarchical, autonomous system with elite, liberal education quite separate from vocational education until the 1990's; in Norway the university was an extension of the civil service and training ground to learn a trade or develop professionals and public sector workers (Kogan et al 2006:165). Norwegian traditions embedded ideas about HE's role in developing skills needed for society, while the English traditions were more individually and academically oriented. This may explain why values of social mobility and equality, which were strong in both countries in post-war decades, proved more persistent and influential in Norway. This may also reflect Husén's (1998) view that in Scandinavian education policy is fundamentally tied to ideas of the welfare state and that the aims of education are largely seen in terms of social reform. In contemporary English HE policy educational and social concerns seem too often be factored out, as HE is re-aligned as fundamentally about economic growth and skills for employability.

In each country similar policies were applied and translated in ways that seem to reflect wider national politics and policy-making styles. Kogan et al. (2006) conclude that “reforms espousing similar ideologies varied considerably both with respect to how radical the reforms were and how stable the policies were” due in part to the “system characteristics”, including political attributes, of each country (2006:66). Even while applying substantial structural changes, Norway demonstrated a more incremental approach: local and institutional variation was left largely undisturbed, in line with decentralised political habits; and, institutions and academics were negotiated with. The English ‘heroic’ style of policy and politics saw reforms that were radical, centralised and ‘sharpened’ by the ideological ideas of the 80’s and 90’s that distrusted state provision and embraced competition (Kogan et al., 2006:164).

Finally, while international issues and ideas were clearly important in both countries, the nature and extent of influence varied. In the UK less structural changes were required by Bologna, but the norms and principles of convergence and knowledge economies have been embraced. The imperative to adapt to globalisation and increased competition has been a central idea in justifying HE changes. In Norway the Bologna process required major structural changes, but wider ideological pressures and links to ongoing convergence seem to have been resisted. A temperate, modern version of Scandinavian exceptionalism seems to be evident where international agendas and national ones are balanced against one another and a more sceptical attitude is taken to the apparent need to replace national traditions and priorities with global or international ones. However, international influence on Norwegian policy does seem to be increasing, and this balance between national and international agendas may not persist. Fägerlind & Strömqvist (2004:262) suggest that the “entire Nordic region is becoming increasingly tied to the global post-industrial society, both culturally and economically” and this may shape HE systems powerfully.

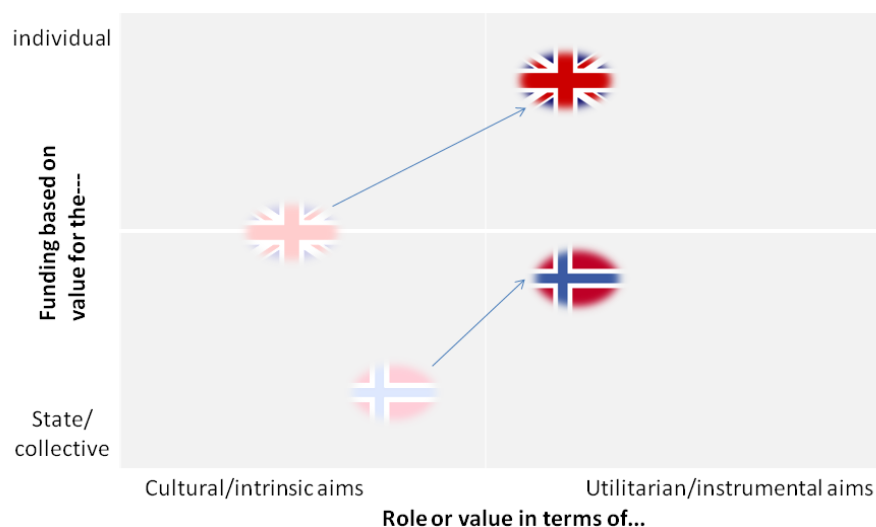
4.5.1 Narrative shifts illustrated by changes in policies and funding

These policy changes can also be seen as presenting a shifting story about what a degree does for the individual and what HE does for society, reflecting the four narratives about value in various ways: during the 60’s university traditions drew on narratives about cultural and intellectual roles, although in England these were framed by strong ideas of autonomy, while this was less of a focus in Norway, where HE was closely tied to functions of the civil service, public sector and ideas of the welfare state. The phases of binary and unitary re-structuring brought in stronger narratives about vocational skills, and manpower planning, although these

were initially accompanied by social narratives developing through the 60's and 70's, that focused on equality and social mobility. These social narratives have retained powerful influence in Norway, but have declined in England. More recent international agendas have supported new economic narratives and seen manpower ideas replaced by a more diffuse role for HE as determinant to the nations' competitive position internationally and driver of the new knowledge economy, narratives evident in both countries but more so in England. These narrative shifts seem to have been sharper and stronger in the UK, where new economic narratives seem to have displaced some of the older social, academic and cultural ones, while Norway has maintained and integrated a stronger range of narratives. Overall while both countries have followed a similar pattern, the narratives about HE value have narrowed much more sharply in England, while they have remained broad in Norway.

Shifts in policy can also be considered in terms of the cross-cutting themes in HE (see table5). Kogan et al. (2006) use a four-part model to map shifts from cultural to utilitarian aims in HE (largely equivalent to intrinsic and instrumental poles) against shifts in the location of authority in HE (See Kogan et al. 2006:167). Their model can be adapted map shifts from cultural to utilitarian aims in HE against the shifts from an emphasis on collective value to individual value, based on the balance in these values suggested by national funding approach (see figure 4). While the UK system clearly positions HE as primarily an individual investment, rather than a part of a welfare state provision or social good to be funded collectively. The Norwegian approach still strikes a balance between individual and collective values which leans towards the collective, and has shifted less far towards economic, utilitarian values.

Figure 4: National shifts in HE values over time



5 Strand 2: Comparative overview of RoR data

The OECD uses educational RoRs as a key indicator for education policy, presenting them as a useful estimate of the incentive in place to take education:

Economic returns to education are a key driver for individuals' decisions to invest time and money in education beyond compulsory schooling. The monetary benefits of completing higher levels of education motivate individuals to postpone consumption today for future rewards. (OECD, Education at a Glance, 2008:184)

Several assumptions are made in the OECD's use of RoRs; that financial factors make up the most important drivers for decisions to take education; that RoRs reflect a premium in earnings which must be based on skills that are needed/scarcely in the labour market; that RoRs signal greater productivity and that higher overall educational levels lead to improved economic outputs for society (as long as demand for more educated people, as measured in RoRs, persists) (see OECD 2008a, 2009a). However, this comparison of RoRs for Norway and the UK suggest some problems with, or limitations to, these assumptions. The analysis therefore questions the appropriateness of such indicators as 'stand-alone' indicators or of measures that tell us a great deal about educational value; these measures may reflect much larger differences in social organisation and non-educational policy between the two countries, making their comparative use in education quite limited, certainly without taking these wider factors into account. Data on the returns to degree level (or in some cases higher education in general) are presented for each country, followed by an overview of data on issues likely to play a part in shaping overall returns, or likely to act alongside returns as influences that shape views on the overall value of a degree in each country.

5.1.1 Private and public returns to HE

Data for 2004¹⁷ returns to tertiary education (ISCED 5/6) show a marked contrast between the two countries: male UK graduates could expect an average return to their degree nearly twice as large as male Norwegian students. A similar, though less pronounced difference is shown for female graduates (see table 7).

¹⁷ Data for more recent years is unavailable: the 2009 edition of Education at a Glance (OECD, 2009a) does not contain key UK data and does not report on IRRs as a percentage return, but as a net value (in Dollars).

Table 7: Private internal RoRs for an individual obtaining a tertiary education, ISCED 5/6 (2004)¹⁸
(see OECD 2008a, Table A10.2)

Country		IRR		
		Male	Female	All
Norway	2004	7,4	8,8	8,1
United Kingdom	2004	14,3	14,5	14,4
OECD average	2004	12,2	11,4	11,8

The OECD average for returns of 11-12% shows that the UK has relatively high returns, while Norway, along with other Scandinavian countries, has some of the lowest (see appendix 9 for OECD countries' IRRs). The extent of difference between these two countries, despite both having long-established, mass HE systems, requires some explanation, and is one of the reasons for this national comparison deserving attention. The OECD presents these IRRs both as a key measure for HE incentives at work, and as a potential lever to steer supply and demand in HE. The OECD does recognize that there are some limitations to these measures in guiding decisions; such measures may be slow to adjust to shifts in labour markets and, conversely, policy changes may take a long period to affect IRRs. Nonetheless, the OECD suggest that if very high RORs are found, this should be seen to signal a need for HE expansion, or easier access to loans, while low returns signal low overall incentives to attend HE are low, and may need to be raised to maintain interest in higher education (OECD 2008a).

The OECD also provides a breakdown of the key factors shaping national IRRs. This is a useful starting point for a more nuanced look at the likely drivers of difference between Norway and the UK (table 8).

Table 8: Private internal rates of return (IRR) for an individual obtaining a tertiary education, ISCED 5/6 (2004)
(Table A10.2, OECD 2008a)

	IRR		Direct cost		Gross earnings benefits		Foregone earnings		Unemployment effect		Income tax effect	
	M	F	M	F	Male	Female	M	F	M	F	M	F
Norway	7,4	8,8	-0,6	-0,7	46,7	46,3	-27,9	-33,5	2,8	2,8	-19,1	-13,0
United Kingdom	14,3	14,5	-7,7	-7,6	45,6	45,7	-27,6	-27,3	3,2	2,5	-10,9	-10,8

¹⁸ OECD averages were calculated based on the average IRR for all 19 countries with data listed (OECD, 2008a). Data for this table, and all others in this chapter, are based on 2008/2009 Education at Glance data sets, downloaded from the OECD's website. References to relevant OECD tables are provided throughout (. Data were edited to present comparative data clearly, for example by generating averages for all OECD countries and producing new charts.

IRRs are primarily determined by earnings differentials, a pattern also noted by the OECD (OECD 2008a:185). However, the importance of other factors in shaping IRRs varies quite markedly in each country. While the gross earnings benefit and foregone earnings are fairly similar in Norway and the UK, income tax is a much bigger factor in Norway, and direct costs (fees) are more significant in the UK. The overall IRR difference between the countries seems to be driven by a mixture of educational factors or policies (direct costs), wider economic factors linked to the labour market (employment and wages) and social and economic policy (income tax). While OECD trend data on IRRs are not available, other studies on IRRs suggest that the UK experienced a marked rise in RoRs in the 1980's, while Norway's did not rise significantly (Hægeland et al, 1999). More recent studies of RoRs suggest that during the 1990's there was little change in the overall pattern of returns: RoRs in the UK remained relatively high (compared to EU countries), at around double those found in Norway, where returns have been below European averages¹⁹.

From the perspective of public sector accounts (table 9), both upper secondary and tertiary education are a good investment: they have a positive effect on public-sector budgets. These levels of education result in more money coming back into public accounts, than it costs to provide them, at least based on the factors accounted for in Public Internal Returns. This public return is markedly higher in the UK, for both educational levels. This higher public benefit in the UK is somewhat surprising when 'income tax effects' were such a strong feature in Norwegian IRRs, and might have been expected to make the 'benefits' of Norwegian HE very significant in public finances.

Table 9: Public internal rates of return for an individual obtaining higher education as part of initial education (2004) (OECD 2008: Table A10.5.)

		Upper secondary education		Tertiary education	
Country	Year	Male	Female	Male	Female
Norway	2004	3,0	1,0	6,8	5,0
United Kingdom	2004	12,2	5,7	12,6	12,9
Average	2004	6,4	4,5	11,1	9,1

¹⁹ A review of several such studies is available in Walker & Zhu (2001) who summarise national data drawn from 15 European countries, based on the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).

HE provides quite strong public returns in each country, although returns are lower than individual returns measured by IRRs. Harmon and Walker (2001) suggest that where private returns are much higher than public returns this provides a weak basis for public subsidies for education. However, the difference in public and private returns is not that marked and there are also reasons to believe that a RoR approach tends to under-estimate public benefits, and over-estimate private ones, as non-financial or less measurable benefits are typically treated as externalities (Psacarapoulous, 2007). It is therefore important to note that in both countries, a positive return for tertiary education is clear even before harder to measure social factors, such as improved health or social cohesion factors such as trust are factored in. In 2009 the OECD added new indicators on ‘the social outcomes of education’, to investigate the relationship between educational attainment and measures of social well-being. Measures of self-assessed health, political interest and interpersonal trust are now included (OECD, 2009). Unfortunately, the UK was not among the 21 OECD covered by these new measures. However the overall results from this expanded public return formula show tertiary education is associated with better self-reported health, higher political interest and higher interpersonal trust (OECD 2009:171). The OECD commented in 2008 that these non-economic features of RoRs probably have important economic repercussions likely to underline the public returns to education (OECD, 2008).

5.2 Contextual factors shaping RoRs

As the data above have made clear, educational returns draw on a range of factors, some more directly related to education policy, many related to employment and wages, and a few based on wider social policies such as taxation. These are therefore important factors to consider in explaining differing national RoRs. They are explored in more detail below, to clarify the economic value of a degree in each country further and to explore the assumptions often made about the implications of low or high RoRs.

Demand for HE in Norway and the UK: enrolment and graduation rates

Based on the IRRs above Norway shows “comparatively weaker incentives to continue education” (OECD, 2008a:183). This issue of incentives might be expected to be related to trends in entry and graduation rates for each country: if there are very large incentives to attend, we should expect high and rising entry rates; low incentives should lead to lower or falling entry and graduation rates. In Norway, entry rates to tertiary education barely moved

between 2000 and 2007 and have fallen slightly in recent years, from a peak of 76% in 2005. In the UK in the same period, entry rates to tertiary education rose gradually, but steadily from 47% in to 55% (see table 10). If we look at graduation rates from tertiary education (table 11) between 2000 and 2007 Norwegian graduation rates continued to climb, while in the UK there was very little change. By 2007, graduation rates from Tertiary type A courses were 39% in the UK and 43% in Norway²⁰.

Table 10: How many students finish secondary education and access tertiary education? (OECD 2009a: Indicator A2)

	2000	2005	2006	2007
Norway	67	76	67	66
United Kingdom	47	51	57	55
OECD average	47	55	56	56

Table 11: How many students finish tertiary education? (OECD 2009a: Indicator A3)

	2000	2005	2006	2007
Norway	37	41	43	43
United Kingdom	37	39	39	39
OECD average	28	36	37	39

This does not seem to show that the relatively low RoRs in Norway are having a very strong or clear effect of depressing demand for HE, or that high RoRs are leading to very rapid increases in graduation rates in the UK. Although they may be helping increase enrolments, there has been a weaker increase in graduation rates in the UK. The slight decline in enrolment rates in Norway is interesting and may signal interest ‘levelling off’, however, the overall rates of enrolment and graduation remain higher than the UK, and graduation rates are increasing. These patterns don’t seem to support a simple ‘incentive’ reading of RoRs as an explanation of the Norwegian and UK situation.

Educational impact on employment and unemployment

As was shown above (Table 8) the most powerful factor in IRRs is higher earnings associated with HE. It is therefore important to consider what could explain these earning premiums. The

20 This difference is likely to be greater than these figures suggest, as they are not adjusted for international students. As of 2006, the UK had a high numbers of international students compared to OECD averages, while Norway had low levels (OECD 2008a:80). Adjusted figures excluding international students are not available for the UK, but adjusted rates for many other countries show marked differences.

most fundamental advantage a degree can offer in terms of financial returns is a decreased chance of unemployment. Both Norway and the UK have had high rates of employment for 25-64 year olds (OECD 2009a:121), but as table 12 shows, there are some important differences in how employment is distributed. Although unemployment has consistently been higher in the UK than in Norway, for all levels of educational attainment, both countries show a clear reduction in rates of unemployment, as educational attainment rises. Higher levels of education do seem to act as a way of reducing the risk of unemployment. However, this data shows quite a small difference between the countries, compared to the big differences in RoRs: unemployment rates are low in both countries (compared to OECD averages), and both countries show that those not completing compulsory education are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as those with tertiary education. However, in Norway, overall levels of unemployment remain slightly lower, and differences in unemployment rates by education are less marked.

Table 12: Unemployment trends by level of educational attainment (1997-2007) ²¹

	Level of Educational Attainment	1997	2002	2007
Norway	Below upper secondary	4,0	3,4	3,3
	Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary	3,1	2,9	1,3
	Tertiary education	1,7	2,1	1,4
United Kingdom	Below upper secondary	8,4	6,0	6,5
	Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary	5,5	3,6	3,9
	Tertiary education	3,1	2,4	2,3
OECD average	Below upper secondary	10,1	9,4	9,0
	Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary	6,7	5,8	4,8
	Tertiary education	4,1	3,7	3,3

Interpreting these differences is challenging and complex. The OECD states that the association between higher levels of education and higher employment rates are “principally because those with higher levels of education have made a larger investment in their own human capital and they need to recoup their investment” (OECD, 2009:120). The OECD also suggest that unemployment rates signal the match between skills developed in education system and those demanded in the labour market (OECD, 2009:123). This reading of the data assumes that it is primarily financial concerns that drive post HE employment decisions, as well as motivation and success; it also assumes that employability is based on skills or

21 Number of 25-64 year-olds unemployed as a percentage of the labour force aged 25 to 64, by level of educational attainment (OECD 2009a: Table A6.4a)

qualities developed during tertiary education, not those acquired previously or elsewhere. Based on such assumptions both the Norwegian and UK systems would seem to be functioning fairly well, as a factor that lessens chances of unemployment, although the effect is stronger in the UK, in the context of slightly higher general unemployment.

High Returns and wage premiums reflecting productivity?

According to most economics of education theory and the OECD's interpretations, high returns reflect an HE systems' effectiveness in improving human capital and raising productivity. High returns should be found alongside a higher productivity premium. However, the cases of the UK and Norway don't seem to fit this model neatly. Norway has extremely high rates of productivity, with a high GDP and low working hours. The UK has slightly higher productivity than the OECD average, with slightly lower hours than the average.

Table 13: OECD estimates of labour productivity²²

	Gross domestic product (US dollars)	Gross domestic product (US dollars)	Average hours worked per person	GDP per hour worked	GDP per hour worked as % of USA (USA=100)
Norway	2548322	279962	1422	75,2	136
United Kingdom	1448055	2185955	1653	44,9	81,2
OECD-TOTAL	NA	40135529	1740	41,8	75,6

The UK has markedly lower productivity than Norway (Table 13), despite its higher RoR. Norway's very high productivity may be explained, in part, by higher graduation rates: although returns are lower, the proportion attending HE is higher, which may explain the countries productivity. Alternatively, Norwegian employers may simply be getting a very good deal: very productive man-hours, for relatively modest wage premiums. Norway's high productivity is a familiar problematic case for those studying human capital in Europe. Asplund & Pereira discuss the challenge in interpreting Norwegian return data, emphasizing that "it must be the case that more educated workers are more productive in performing certain tasks compared to unskilled workers, otherwise employers would not hire them at the higher price", and that the low private rate of return in Norway requires more investigation to

²² Data accessed on 17 March 2010 from OECD.Stat. The OECD estimates are based on GDP and employment from the OECD Annual National Accounts and on hours worked from the OECD Employment Outlook. Estimates of productivity levels are more uncertain than estimates of productivity growth, and the measures should be interpreted with caution.

see if it really does mean that “education adds less to productivity in our country than in other countries” (Asplund & Pereira, 1999:251). The issue of productivity does not seem, therefore, to help to clarify the reasons for, or interpretation of, differing RoRs in the two countries.

Wage differences: Graduate and non-graduate pay

Patterns of earnings are also crucial in determining overall RoRs (OECD 2008a). The distribution of income and overall level of equality are therefore important factors to consider. A comparison of wage differentials, and the overall range in wealth (or levels of equality) is provided in this section.

The wage differentials in OECD countries vary significantly, the OECD suggests these differences are based on a wide range of factors: demand for skills in the labour market, the supply of those with certain kinds of education, the incidence of part-time work and also differences shaped by national employment and social policy, such as minimum wage legislation and the influence of unions (OECD 2009a). The OECD also suggests that earning differentials, similarly to RoRs, are “key measures of the financial incentives available for an individuals to invest in further education.” (OECD 2009a:138). If we look at overall associations between increased education and earnings, it is clear that a degree does tend to lead to greater financial rewards in employment, in both countries. As in IRRs, the strength of this incentive differs: in 2007, Norway had a percentage point gap between the relative income of those with an upper secondary and those with a tertiary education of 51%, while in the UK this gap in relative earnings was 89% (table 14).

Table 14: Relative earnings: adult population (1997-2007)²³

	2006	
Norway	Below upper secondary	78
	Tertiary	129
	<i>Percentage point difference</i>	51
United Kingdom	Below upper secondary	71
	Tertiary	160
	<i>Percentage point difference</i>	89

²³ By educational attainment, for 25-64 year-olds (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education = 100) (OECD 2009a: Table A7.2a.)

There is also evidence that the patterns of relative earnings in each country, and the difference between them, have been quite stable over time (see figure 5)²⁴. This is a useful trend to consider, as OECD IRR data are not available for this long a timeframe, and as noted above the main driver of these IRRs are earnings benefits.

Figure 5: Trends in relative earnings: adult population (1997-2007)²⁵

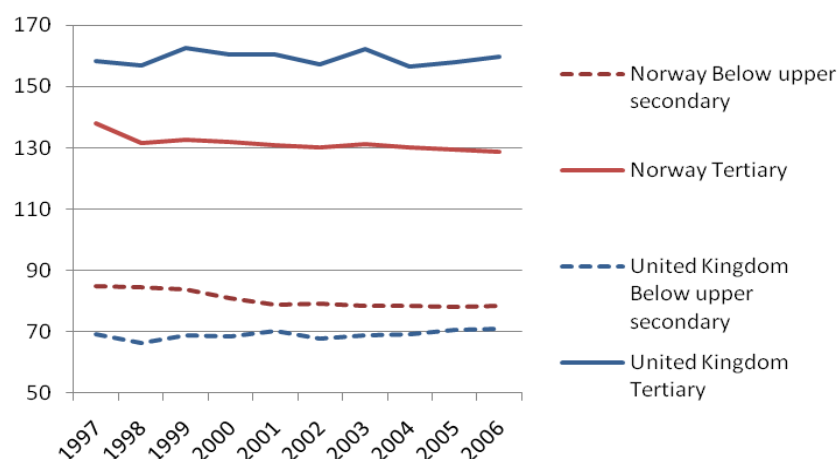
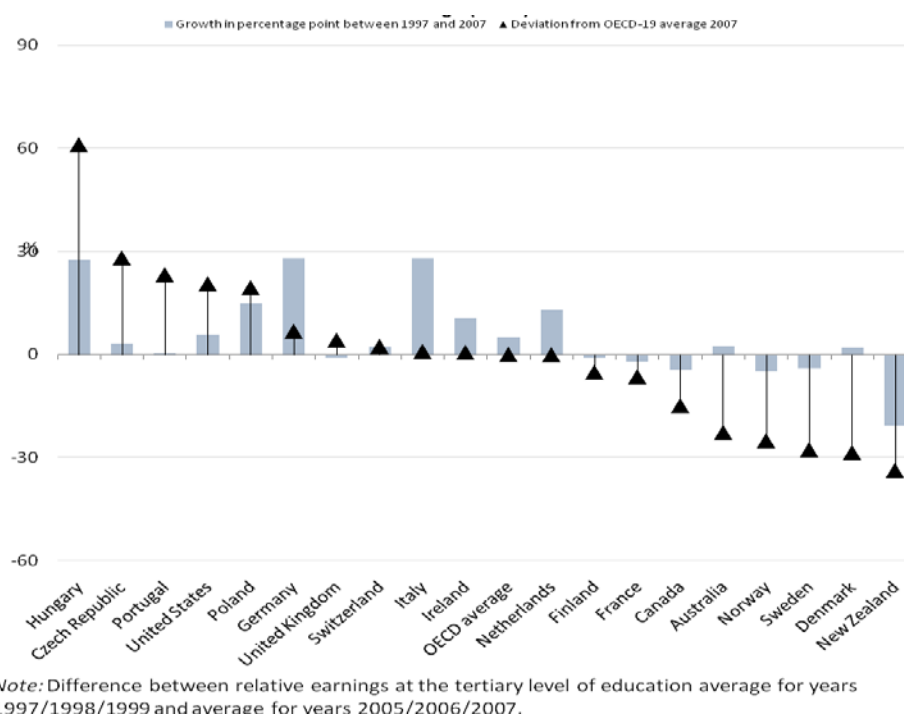


Figure 6: Average relative earnings growth at the tertiary level of education between 1997 and 2007 and average relative earnings at the tertiary level of education deviation from OECD average (2007). (OECD 2009a: A7.1)

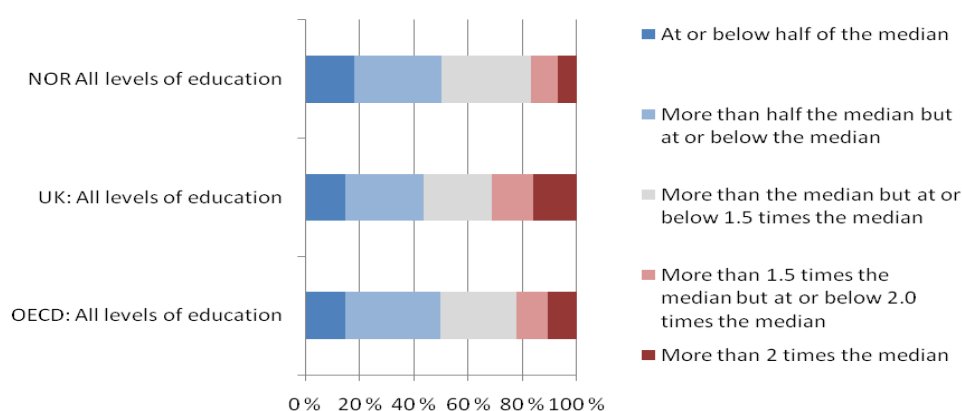


²⁴ The percentage point difference between upper secondary and tertiary levels varied little between 1997 – 2006: Norway varied between 47 and 53 points; the UK between 87 and 94 points. OECD indicator A7.

²⁵ Missing data for Norway in 2000 were replaced with a mid point average between 1999 and 2001 data.

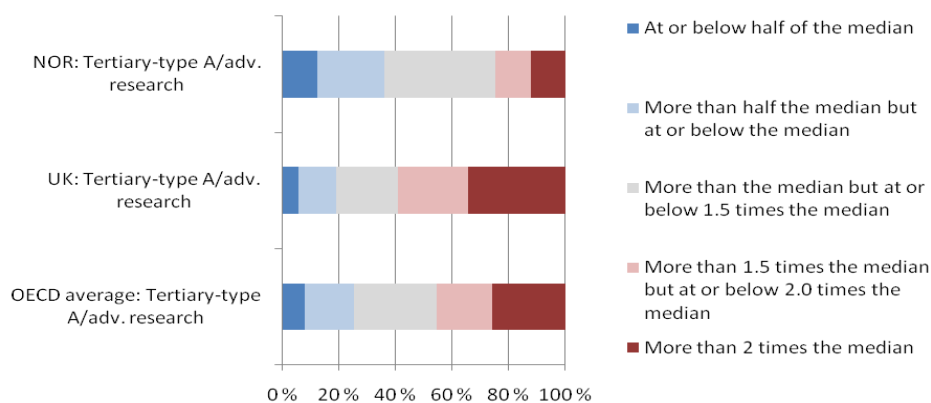
Wage differences are clearly a key driver of national returns to HE. Significantly, Norway and the UK seem to have quite different wage distributions, it is worth looking in more detail at how patterns in wages overlap with educational attainment. The following bar chart (figure 7) shows that overall wage distributions (all educational levels) are quite different in the UK and Norway: The UK has a large proportion of relatively high earners, compared to Norway and other OECD countries, with more people clustered towards the top end of pay distributions, and a smaller middle band of wages. In Norway, the middle band and lower levels are larger, and are much more in line with the typical OECD pattern.

Figure 7: Distribution of the 25-64 year-old population by level of earnings and educational attainment, all levels of education. (2007 or latest available year, OECD 2009a)



When wages are considered amongst those with higher education (figure 8), these differences are magnified: in the UK more than half of those with a tertiary education (59%) have earnings greater than 1.5 times the median, and a quarter have earnings greater than twice the median. In Norway, the proportion of tertiary-educated people in these top two bands of earnings is much smaller, a little under a quarter of those with tertiary education receive more than 1.5 times the median earnings.

Figure 8: Distribution of the 25-64 year-old population by level of earnings and educational attainment, Tertiary type A and advanced. (2007 or latest available year, OECD 2009a)

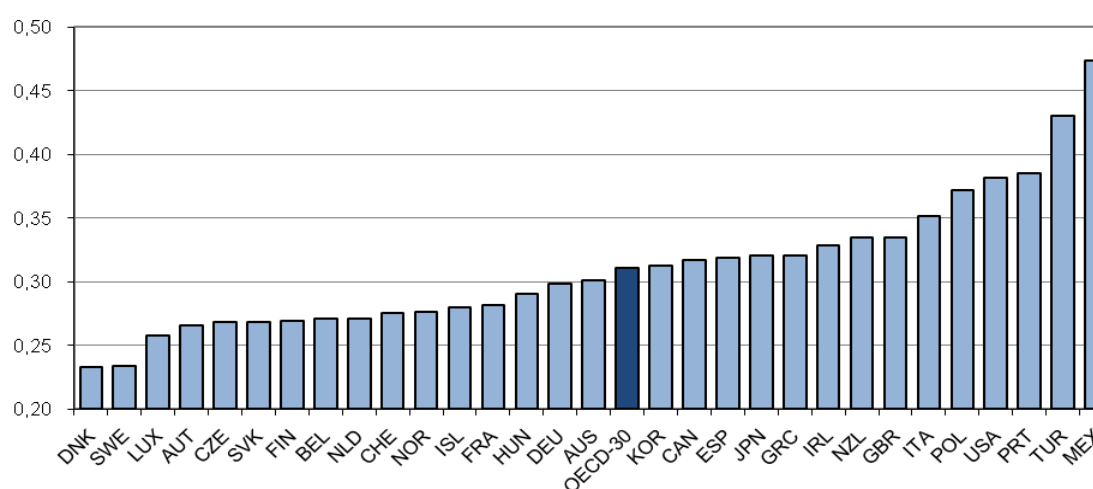


This perspective on the data is important as it suggests that patterns of wage distribution by educational attainment are markedly different in Norway and the UK, but it also gives a picture of the *range* of effects that HE can have on wages within the tertiary educational level, instead of simply describing the average effect; to clarify, this data makes it clear that there will be some who, despite high levels of education, receive average or low income, and some others will achieve high income levels without higher education. This distribution of earnings also further questions how well educational attainment provides skills which are then appropriately rewarded by employers.

Reflecting overall inequality? Gini values and RoRs

One final possible driver of the differences in RoRs between Norway and the UK is overall levels of equality. This is a timely concern. The issue of pay gaps and overall inequality in OECD countries was recently the subject of an extensive review, which suggested many OECD countries had become less equal in recent years (OECD, 2008c). A common measure of overall inequality is provided by Gini values (see Glossary) and according to this measure Norway and the UK sit on opposite sides of OECD averages (see Figure 9).

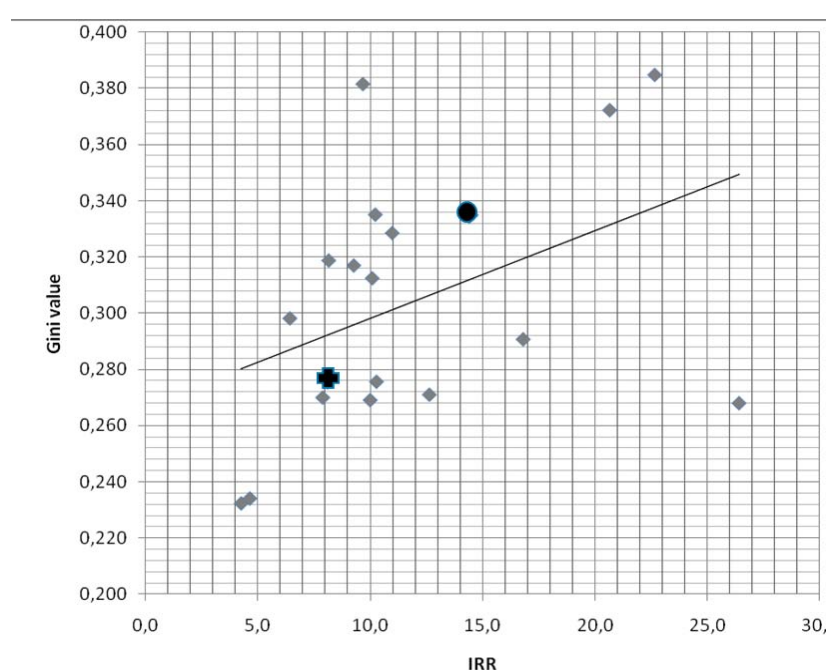
Figure 9: Gini coefficients of income inequality in OECD countries, mid-2000s. (OECD, 2008c)



Hægeland et al (1999) suggest that Norway's long-standing position as an 'outlier' in OECD countries, in terms of a compressed and stable wage dispersion, is one of the reasons that RoRs have remained relatively low and stable in Norway throughout the 80's and 90's, in contrast to many countries, including the UK which saw steep increases in RoRs alongside increased wage dispersion and inequality.

Relationships between these measures of inequality and RoRs have not been explored by the OECD, but a simple plot of OECD countries' results on these two measures suggests a positive trend: the higher the IRR, the higher the level of inequality as measured by Gini values (See Figure 10, Norway is shown by a cross, the UK by a circle). This is not a thorough statistical analysis, but is an interesting pattern nonetheless. More investigation of such a relationship might suggest alternative mechanisms for the links between educational level, returns, wage differentials and overall inequality, than those used by the OECD so far.

Figure 10: Gini values by IRR for 19 OECD countries, mid 2000's.²⁶



It is widely accepted that HE tends to lead to some advantage in both wages and employment, and it can be suggested this effect is based on skills, productivity, signalling or any other factors. However, whatever the processes driving this premium, it may well be that the overall *magnitude* of the premium depends less on any educational factors, and more the overall levels of inequality surrounding the HE system. Those with advanced education tend to end up nearer the top of any social and economic distribution, so in countries with large overall pay differentials and a small band of mid-level incomes, the impact of HE is more pronounced. In such a model, the magnitude of HE-related financial advantage found in each country is less dependent on differences in educational approach, skills, productivity or

²⁶ This chart was created using Gini data from the mid 2000s for OECD countries (OECD, 2008c), plotted against the Individual RoRs from 2004, as reported in OECD (2008b).

incentives, and more about the wider social and economic system HE is surrounded by. The effect and incentive of HE measures focused on financial outcomes may reflect the wider context and wider national differences. Furthermore, it is also possible that HE systems play an influential part in shaping overall levels of equality. In the US, strong increases in wage inequality between 1973 and 2005 have been attributed to increased returns in higher education (Lemieux, 2006 in Psacharopoulos, 2007:35). Katz et al. (1995) have also found that increased educational premiums are a driving force in increased wage dispersion in many OECD countries (Katz et al. 1995, in Hægeland et al., 1999).

While this interpretation of returns is only speculation, it underscores how the assumptions made about the relationships driving returns and benefits from HE are also uncertain. The issue of inequality is politically salient in both countries studied: Norway has long been held up as one of the most equal societies, and there are now suggestions that exceptional position is starting to shift (OECD, 2008c). Graduate pay has shown a steeper upwards trend than overall employment (Arnesen, 2007) which may suggest higher RoRs, and overall inequality are beginning to emerge. In the UK, concerns over inequality have been having something of a political ‘moment’: inequality has come under increased scrutiny partly due to the fallout from the financial crisis and controversy over very high pay in the financial sector in particular; and, several publications and studies have suggested the contemporary level of inequality in the UK is high and rising²⁷.

Variation within countries in terms of RoRs

A final issue to consider in interpreting these national RoRs is how average patterns of returns apply across course types, degree subjects and institutions. A recent analysis of graduate earnings by Ramsey (2008) finds positive returns to HE in the UK overall but also substantial variation by degree subject, degree class and, to some extent, institution type. A second UK analysis²⁸ found differences in wages by degree subject were shifting rapidly, and that returns to some degrees have had fallen sharply or even become negative (Walker and Zhu, 2001). Data on Norwegian graduate pay (Arnesen, 2007) shows different averages by subject, but

²⁷ A recent analysis for the National Equalities Office showed that that Britain is more unequal than many other industrial countries and is less equal than a generation ago (Hills et al., 2010).

²⁸ Walker and Zhu used Labour Force data from 1992-2000 to explore the relationship between years of education and wages. (Walker & Zhu, 2001).

there are reasons to believe these patterns will be less marked. Firstly as overall wage distributions are narrower, but also as studies suggest that the variation in pay within groups who have taken HE increases, as overall returns rise, suggesting there is a positive correlation between the average wage premium and wage risk (Martins & Pereira, 2000). It may well be that the systems and contexts that generate higher RoRs to degrees also inevitably increase the degree of risk associated with investing in HE.

5.3 Comparison of RoR data and key points

This strand of the research addresses the question of how the measureable economic value of a degree varies between the two countries and what could explain those differences. Very different patterns of return seem to arise in the two countries through quite different systems of interaction between HE systems, labour markets and overall social structures and levels of inequality. Norway has a HE system with low-returns, but high entry and graduation rates (though these may be flattening out). Those relatively low returns are found in a context of very low unemployment, high productivity, low wage differentials and high equality, although inequality shows signs of increasing. In the UK, HE offers relatively high returns, with fairly high and rising entry and graduation rates, although these remain below Norway's. These high returns are found in a context of fairly low unemployment, reasonable productivity, substantial wage differences and quite marked inequality.

This chapter raises some questions about the use and interpretation of such data, suggesting that they may be fairly 'thin' in educational value, limiting their use as 'stand alone' educational indicators to guide policy; in particular in how far they summarize the overall incentive to take HE, or the role of HE in adding to productivity, as demonstrated by higher wages. While this financial perspective on value, offers a robust picture of difference between the two countries it provides little in the way of explanation of these differences. This limitation of Return data has been noted by Walker & Zhu who point out that while "rates of return are typically estimated with considerable precision... we find it difficult to explain much of this cross-country variation" (2001:14). Walker and Zhu (2001) also suggest that the belief in a causal relationship between earnings and schooling is problematic, as it may well reflect underlying differences in ability, a signalling value, or other factors unrelated to the effectiveness of education. Indeed, the role of wages in determining RoRs may mean they are better seen as a measure of the interaction between HE and wider social differences, rather

than an 'educational' measure. As noted by the OECD, wage distributions are shaped not just by education systems but by demand for skills in the labour market, the incidence of part-time work and differences in national employment and social policy, such as minimum wage legislation and the influence of unions (OECD 2009a). If the returns to HE are powerfully shaped by wage distributions and overall inequality, it seems valid to ask how far these are in fact education measures. This is in line with conclusions from other studies: Hægeland et al (1999) investigate the concerns that low and stable Norwegian graduate premiums reflect low educational quality (based on the assumption that low returns must signal low benefits being produced by HE) and conclude that it is more likely a case of supply and demand for graduates in Norway having been more well balanced than in other states; they also mention alternative interpretations that overall wage compressions may be reflect strong centralised wage bargaining systems (Khan, 1998, as cited in Hægeland et al 1999). Interestingly, such systems (both via unions and Fair Wage Councils) were removed and weakened throughout the 80's in the UK leaving a decentralized and patchy system for wage bargaining (Broughton, 2009).

This all suggests RoRs role as measures of student incentives to study or as measures of HE quality, and the links between HE, productivity and pay, may be more problematic than economic conventions suggest, at least in the cases of Norway and the UK. Finally, the analysis suggest problems in relying on average returns to HE, as there is evidence of a high degree of variation within education levels and between degree subjects.

Perhaps due to some of these inconsistencies, interest does seem to be building in the non-financial elements, and the wider costs and benefits of HE that are left out. The decision by the OECD to include these broader measures may suggest a recognition of having missed out some aspects of HE value, and a desire to build in meaningful aspects of public or social value. However, the values involved in individual incentives and motivations still seem to be neglected. New OECD measures of social outcome associated with HE may also suggest a renewed interest in non-educational aspects of HE, particularly linked to social cohesion. Psacharopoulos & Patrinos concludes "if one could include externalities, then social rates of return may well be higher than private Rates of return to education." (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004:117)

6 Strand 3: Students' views on the value of a degree

This chapter presents an overview of the findings from qualitative discussion groups with students in Oslo and London. It seeks to clarify areas of broad agreement or similarity across groups, and clarify differences between different national groups and degree subjects. The first section (6.1) provides an overview of students' broad views about university, their decisions to attend, how they went about choosing a subject and their attitudes to the role of funding systems and individual background in shaping HE choices. The next section sets out students' views on the key benefits they hope to receive from university and the way their degree is expected to be valuable (6.2). A more interpretive discussion about how students construct degree value through group identities and metaphors follows (6.3). Finally, findings are summarised and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and other strands (6.4).

6.1 Students' views on going to university

6.1.1 Decisions to attend university

For many students it seems university attendance is simply an expectation or 'norm', a tendency that seems to be strongly supported in England by pressure from schools and peer groups. Across groups, a handful of students described a different experience, where they had not expected to attend and changed their minds on leaving school or after a period of work. Some of these students were quite reluctant to attend, but saw their degree as a necessity.

It's never been 'do you go to university or not'? You just go. London Econ., F

Most participants had 'always' expected to go to university. They could not recall a point where they made a decision to go, making it difficult to unpack their motivation in detail. One student in London remembered announcing at four years old that she wanted to go to Oxford, but could not explain why. Most students had long seen university to be the normal route for those doing reasonably well in school, or those with siblings and parents who have taken HE.

I always knew I would have a higher education, maybe because of my family background where everyone has a higher education and I used to have good grades at school. Oslo Econ. M2.

Students were unsure what they might have done instead of coming to university. Non-university routes for training or education were unfamiliar. Norwegian students had the impression that few opportunities for workplace training or apprenticeships remain. English students were very vague about other options, other than ‘vocational college things’. Most assumed the alternative was going straight into low-skill jobs.

This widespread, unquestioned expectation of university attendance was linked to two issues in London. Both subject groups described significant pressure from their schools and common messages from schools that university was the best route and a requirement for success. A second factor was that the vast majority of pupils from London participants’ schools had gone on to university. This may reflect the more hierarchical, less mixed school system in England. This exchange amongst biology students in London illustrates the first set of views:

M1: That’s the standard thing, you’re just pressured... well not exactly pressured, encouraged. It’s just the obvious choice, it’s like they make it sounds like it’s what you should do.

F7: We had this careers person and she just made it sound like you wouldn’t make anything of yourself.

F6: you’d fail...

M3: ...you won’t amount to anything.

F4: The only way you can be a successful person is to have degree.

In contrast to these views, a small number of students across the groups described deciding to attend at the very end of school or after a period in work. Their reasons for taking a degree were fairly consistent: concerns at becoming ‘stuck’ in work without much interest or challenge, or a general sense of limited opportunities.

When I was younger I used to say to my parents, ‘I’m not going to go’. And then when it actually got to it...it was just from school really... you have to go. London Biol. F5

I thought I would start working as soon as I finished highschool. I had an internship and I was doing an apprenticeship (lærling) in administration. While I was there I realised that wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, there were no challenges in the work, and I saw what other colleagues were doing and economics interested me. Oslo Econ. F5.

Indeed, several students in London described being quite reluctant to go to university, and had done so either out of a sense of duty (to parental expectations) or because they saw a degree as providing a ‘backup plan’ to creative ambitions (such as drama or music).

I wanted to go to drama school, but my teachers and parents were all like ‘No. You need to go and get proper transferable skills, and get a degree’. So hopefully I’m going to do this and then go to drama school... it’s just like a backup. London Biol. F8.

6.1.2 Student’s attitudes towards HE funding systems

Despite the significant differences in funding arrangements, a similar, resigned view characterised students’ views on funding: that university is worthwhile under funding arrangements, despite loans seen being seen as quite high and a concern for some. Funding systems are thought to allow most who wish to attend to do so. It may be that these issues did not raise particularly strong opinions, or much discussion amongst students in either country, in part due to being discussed late on in groups.

The cost of HE was raised as more of a concern in London, both groups mentioning this in the warm-up exercises and again in discussions on pay expectations. The loans system clearly adds to London graduates expectation of, and sense they need, high pay. Despite concerns about debt and high loans being daunting, there is little criticism of funding systems or how loans are repaid; most students said they try not to think about: large loans are seen as an unquestioned and normal, if unwelcome, aspect of university.

I was stressed about [paying it back], but now I think when the time comes I can worry about it then. London Econ. F4.

You don’t think at all about what you’re going to do afterwards. So it wouldn’t be feasible to go to uni without a loan. They’re essential. London Econ. F2.

In Norway, some students made a point of Norway being a relatively cheap place to study, and most Oslo students felt the combination of loans and stipends worked well, and saw loans as a normal part of student life. However, criticisms were made that the loans system is simply unfair or that loans are insufficient, and many have to work part-time as students.

I’m going to have a huge loan. And if I don’t get paid well enough it’s going to be stressful to pay down a mortgage and loan. I know it’s better than a lot of countries but I would like it to be free. Oslo Biol. F8.

A handful of students in Oslo and London referred to cost-benefit ideas to justify HE costs, framing their studies as a long-term investment.

I kind of see it as an investment in my future. I’ll pay for it now, and I’ll have debt. But if I didn’t I hopefully would be earning as much in the future. London Econ F4.

Do loans and HE costs influence students' HE decisions?

While participants were not seriously concerned about the costs of HE, some London students suggested they might impact on others decisions. Fees were mentioned as a disincentive to taking longer, professional courses such as medicine or architecture. Students suggested one had to be absolutely certain about their future plans to justify this.

My parents are both doctors so they had a vocational reason to go to university; they knew what they were going to do. I thought I should do something like that, and very nearly did medicine, but I just couldn't come out of school and commit to [it]. London Econ. F2.

If costs for HE had been substantially higher most London students did not think this would have discouraged them from attending university, but might have led them to pick subjects linked to high paid careers or chosen a university in a area with lower living costs (compared to London). There were concerns that further increases in costs could limit access.

There was a plan for top universities to able to charge their own fees, like in America. That's just a really dangerous thing to do. It would filter out people. London Econ. F3.

While there were some criticisms of loans in Oslo, they were not seen as such a prominent concern or influence on degree subject or universities, more as a general reason to pick a degree carefully instead of choosing carelessly and having to switch courses. Increased costs were not expected to influence Norwegian students HE decisions and were seen as unlikely.

Think about what you want, because it's expensive to be wrong, well, it's actually kind of cheap to study in Norway, but it's still 8300 Kroner a year... Oslo Biol. M1.

Student in Oslo and London had similar reactions to the idea of lowering HE costs. Lower costs would lead more people to attend HE, those in favour of lower costs or new subsidies suggested society benefited from more education in general and saw public funding as fairer.

It would be smart to make it possible for more people to study. The country as a whole would benefit in the long term... Knowledge is important. Oslo Biol. M2.

Others were against free or cheaper HE that might dilute quality or bring in more people who were uninterested in studying or simply avoiding work.

I don't think it would be better... more people could study and I don't think everyone deserves to study. You shouldn't take everything for granted, thinking 'oh I can go and study whenever I want'. Think how many freeloaders would come. Oslo Biol. M1.

6.1.3 Student background and degrees

At various points in the discussions students were prompted to see if they thought that, in general, family background was an influence on HE decisions or the value of a degree. In general it raised little concern or discussion. The only issue that came up with any consistency was that parent's experience of HE is influential: if parents and siblings have attended university, it is absolutely expected you should go and it is harder to attend if parents or siblings have not gone to university. However, the idea that other aspects of background might be related to decisions to attend, was not raised, and indeed was rejected when prompts were made that it might be an issue. It may be this is too sensitive a topic or those students did not think issues such as wealth, ethnicity or gender play a role in HE opportunities or benefits.

Background doesn't make a difference no, but I would say it also depends on the person, like if you're coming straight out of school, and you're a bit tired of school, then it's better to take one year off. The majority of kids in Norway take one year off, and do something else for a year. Oslo Biol. M4.

When participants were asked about the characteristics associated with getting a degree they focused on how someone had coped with school. There was a common view that if you hadn't enjoyed school, had poor academic results, expected a lot of guidance or support or thought the courses would be easy, HE might not be a good idea. In Norway, the need for general 'studikompetanse' was a focus while high grades defined suitable university students in England.

You should know about their grades. If they've done really really well throughout school then it's just natural to take that on, going into uni. London Econ. F3.

Indeed, the idea seems fairly established across groups that existing systems are fairly open, and that those who don't go largely do so because they were not good at academic study, or did not want to. This was also in line with view that universities draw in people from a wide range of areas and background (see 6.2.2)

6.1.4 Choosing a degree subject

Across all groups, more purposeful decisions about HE were only made when it came to choosing where and what to study, typically during the last two years of upper secondary school (6th form in England, Vidergående skole in Norway). There were clear differences in this area between economics and biology students around how they chose their subject, and

also some difference between Oslo and London student's approach. The choice of a biology degree was based primarily linked to interest and the subject being well-respected and serious. Students in London and Oslo talked about their interest in the natural world, often from a young age. The desire to go on to or continue to study in directly related areas was another reason for choosing Biology, although more so in Oslo than London. Oslo biology students also expected the field to lead onto interesting, meaningful work.

I've always been interested in nature, biology was a natural choice, and I want to work with something I'm interested in and where I think that I can perhaps do something for the better. Oslo Biol. M2.

In London, biology is also seen as an impressive qualification as a natural science that demonstrates ability and an analytical approach favoured by employers.

A lot of people who've done biology say it opens up a whole world of things -not just science, but people have done business gone and accounting. London Biol. F4.

In Oslo, while biology is also seen as academically serious, a bachelor it is not thought to offer a wide range of jobs at, but quite limited in career options beyond teaching. Students suggested their course would not therefore suit those concerned with high-status or high pay jobs (see discussion on group identity, section 6.3.1).

In contrast to the biology students, economics students in Oslo and London rarely talked about choosing their subject primarily based on interest. Oslo students related the choice to being good at related skills (particularly maths) and it being a good degree for a range of career options, particularly in areas deemed useful, meaningful and challenging.

I wanted to take a subject I was good in at school. And then I thought what you can use this for? I didn't want to be a scientist – I also liked physics and math – but this is a bit broader and there's a bit more practical work you can get. Oslo Econ. M2.

London students made some similar points, but more strongly, some suggesting they did not find economics interesting (this was underlined by one student who did, and felt this was very unusual); others said they had chosen an economics degree due to expected career advantages, over subjects they preferred.

For me it was a choice between what I really wanted to do but wasn't that good at and what I was good at, but maybe didn't want to do. And I went for what I was good at. I went for [economics] what I had the strongest grades in and stuff. London Econ. F3.

In both countries economics was seen as a well-respected subject offering desirable career options. However, what those desirable career options included varied. In England, students expected to go onto high-paid banking or financial roles, while a few others hoped to move into law or overseas development. In Norway economics was thought to offer broader options in finance, aid agencies, the public sector, political roles or business, though many Oslo students felt they would need a masters degree to have all those options (see section 6.2.3).

Both groups of Oslo students saw subject choice as a personal and important decision. Although they based decisions on slightly different criteria, most picked their subject in reference to their skills or quite specific career aspirations related to their subject. This applied to a few London students, but there was a stronger tendency to see subject choice as fairly within a range of ‘respected’, broad subjects; they focused less on interest or aspirations.

I wanted to keep my options open – I didn’t want to choose a job with my degree. They tell you that [when it comes to] having a degree it doesn’t matter that much what you do. London Econ. M1

The impression of less personal, more instrumental decisions in England was increased by comments about more ‘competitive’ subjects and institutions. There was a clear sense of hierarchy, that degrees are not of a broadly similar value and that their value (especially in terms of employability) is determined by the institution, how seriously the subject is taken by employers and the final grade.

If you are going for a subject where it’s really competitive, like medicine, you can go anywhere. If you’re going for a subject that’s less competitive, I think you’d want to go for a good institution... a lot depends on degree class. I need to get a 2.1 or 1st. London Econ. F4.

This seems to be built on the anticipated views of employers and perceptions of degrees as more or less serious or ‘real’: in contrast to their own degrees, London students described courses in obscure subjects or from institutions with weak reputations as a ‘waste of time’.

Whenever I’ve said I’m doing Biology at UCL people are like ‘oh, OK so you’re doing a real degree’ those exact words. London Biol. M2.

If you do some course in Surf Sciences, at Exeter like my brother, it’s just a joke. At the end he didn’t care about his results, he just said well this is a complete waste of time. My parents were keen for him to stay in education but it was a waste of time. London Econ. M1

6.2 What makes a degree valuable? The main benefits of a degree

The main benefits of a degree were the central issue in group discussions. In explaining these benefits, students explained how they construct and understand the value of their degree. The analysis here is based both on the Post It exercise, and more importantly discussions around this exercise, where they explained and prioritised between benefits. The discussion guide contained prompts for issues expected to be mentioned but only after opportunities for issues to be raised spontaneously; these discussions were led by the Post It exercise and participants own priorities (see appendix 8 for examples of responses). While similar benefits were identified by students in all groups, they were prioritized and framed differently across the groups. Three common areas related to:

- Learning: gaining greater knowledge and education
- The university experience: independence, self-development, maturity, social life
- Advantages in jobs/career: employability, access to 'better' jobs, pay²⁹

Table 15 (at the end of this chapter) summarises students' views, and highlights differences between groups, along with other benefits mentioned and relevant issues.

6.2.1 Benefits related to learning

Knowledge and education were raised in all groups, but less spontaneously and with less emphasis in London³⁰. There were also strong differences about what made certain knowledge valuable between subject areas. These issues are therefore discussed in turn by subject area. National contrasts are highlighted where relevant but there was also an overall national difference in views about the value of knowledge and learning that seemed to reflect the level of interest in going on to further studies. In London, while a masters degree is seen as offering advantages, few students planned to go on to a masters, than in Oslo where many anticipated carrying straight on to further studies in related areas. While a bachelors degree

²⁹ A wider range of other issues were also mentioned, although with less emphasis: Range of general skills, life skills and personal qualities acquired/developed (life skills, motivation); Time to think about future/career preferences; Parents/family expectations fulfilled. (See appendix X for full summary).

was still seen as a useful ‘strand alone’ qualification in London, in Oslo was thought to be important to specialise and as offer access more challenging jobs.

How is learning valuable? Biology students’ views

Views about the most valuable aspects of a degree underscored disciplinary differences already evident in terms of subject choices: biologists’ interest in the natural world gave them a strong sense that their learning was valuable and important. In Oslo in particular it was a strong sense that learning was valuable in its own right and would develop them intellectually and personally, as illustrated in the following exchange:

F6: It’s important in society, to have knowledge, and be able to discuss things. I think also, knowledge is a basic part of being a human being...

F6: You engage yourself to something that you work hard to learn... it will develop you as a human being.

M1: and [then] you want to learn more.

Oslo Biology students saw learning and research as valuable undertakings for society, through incremental increases in understanding and improved judgements. However, they also felt that intrinsic value in their learning was enhanced if they could apply it in future roles.

Without knowledge we would still be in the Stone Age. It is the knowledge that has brought us where we are today. M2. Oslo Biol.

[It matters what we use it for] otherwise it wouldn’t be a real reason for gaining knowledge. Oslo Biol. F6.

London students found it harder to elaborate on the value of their learning beyond general wanting to ‘understand things better’ or ‘keep my brain active’. The more important valuable aspect of learning for London Biologists was not subject-specific knowledge but transferable skills associated with science degrees:

That’s what people in business want though isn’t it? They want someone with a degree in a real subject. Rather than a degree in business studies. Go and study something real, and then learn all the stuff you’d learn in business studies on the job. London Biol. M2.

One explanation may be that many Oslo students wished to work in areas directly related to Biology and this was less common in London. For those who hoped to go on to do research of post-graduate courses, knowledge was a central factor in the value of their degree: the biology students had a sense that they were following a scientific tradition of investigation and

research, assuming benefits will follow from better understanding. While this was mentioned by a couple of students in London, it was much more strongly expressed in Oslo.

When pushed to prioritise between benefits of their degree, London Biology students generally saw benefits linked to job options and pay as higher priority than learning or knowledge. In Oslo the opposite balance emerged: with a couple of exceptions students saw knowledge and learning as the central benefit of their degree and job opportunities followed from that. This may reflect the stronger interest in Oslo in going on to work or study in areas directly related to their degree. In London learning and degrees were seen more as offering a solid qualification and set of skills for much broader work options.

Economics students' views on the value of learning

Economics students saw gaining knowledge or learning as an important aspect of their degree, emphasising how they would apply this knowledge in their working lives. While this more applied orientation to knowledge was also evident in London, knowledge and learning was discussed more, and seen as more important amongst Oslo students.

Oslo economics students set out a broad spectrum of applications for knowledge gained in their degree, from personal investments and being able to better understand world events in the paper to being a more effective member of voluntary organisations or workplaces. They also saw economic knowledge and skills as directly relevant in many jobs, in social and political organisations, financial institutions and private businesses.

I think the macroeconomics is very important to understand political solutions and what's going on in a country's [leadership/direction]. Like in this [financial] crisis, we had the macro course in the fall, and it's just like [you can] understand what has happened and how to fix it... there is an economic side of every position or issue, so I think when we have this degree, we gain the skills, we will understand more how the world works. Oslo Econ. F6.

This emphasis the value of their knowledge for problem solving was distinctive to Oslo economics students. They were interested in their subject because of their belief it is a powerful problem-solving tool for real-world issues, indeed, this perceived usefulness and relevance was prioritised over general interest:

It's most important that it's useful. That it's interesting is just a bonus. Oslo Econ. M2.

As in the biology group, many Oslo economics students were interested in going on to postgraduate study or work in related areas. Those students thought their bachelors equipped them with a base of knowledge, but not the kind of specialisation as a masters.

I feel that economics will give me the basics or the background I need to know, and then I can take a masters and [specialise] in other things. Oslo Econ. F3.

In London there was less discussion of learning and knowledge overall and when prompted they found it harder to expand on what this issue meant to them, except very generally.

You get a different perspective on things and just learn more about what's going on around you and get more ability to do things like maths and stuff. London Econ. F2

While all economics students saw their degree as useful, the sense of what made knowledge useful was much thinner in London. While a couple of London economics students' views were similar to those commonly found in Oslo in general they focused on their degree as the 'next step' in general education and offering security or 'something to fall back on'. Learning about their subject was not as important as demonstrating general capability and developing a range of skills they anticipate using directly in work, as illustrated by this comment:

I think [the skills I will use are] understanding texts and what you read in the newspapers - you need that when you're judging markets. Of course maths, that can transfer into your job... The work-focused skills are most important... You also just get some useful skills like self-motivation, the will power to revise and going to the library...London Econ. F4.

Attitudes to knowledge seemed to differ across national and subject groups. There is a tendency for economics students to focus more on the applied value of their skills and learning at work, while biologists focus more on learning and the value of knowledge itself. However, these discussions also show there is not a robust dividing line between more intrinsic or instrumental views of valuable. Some economics students clearly felt their subject was interesting and enjoy learning it *because* they see its relevance all around them. Some biologists see their subject as inherently fascinating but also wish to work in areas where that knowledge and interest is directly relevant and applicable. National differences involve the generally thinner sense of knowledge and learning value in London: students there focused on their degree as proving they had general capabilities and skills, in comparison to the quite rich and wide-ranging sense of educational value Norwegian students described.

6.2.2 The university experience

The importance of the overall university experience was mentioned across groups. However some groups placed much more emphasis on this compared to other issues. While some economy students wrote a Pos Its related to it as one of the three main benefits of a degree, almost all biologists did. Overall the period of studying for a degree is seen as a time of opportunity for self development, gaining life skills and a varied social life. These elements of the university experience are felt to create a unique experience that is very different to working life:

Many people are moving away from home, have their own place for the first time in life, and you get to know a lot of people from different places, so I think that's an important thing about studying. Because, if you just finish high school and get a job in your home town and still see your family and everything, you miss new experiences. Oslo Econ. F6.

All groups suggested that university has introduced them to a broader range of people. This is not just about socialising and fun but seen as a chance to broaden their outlook and establish friendships with those with different backgrounds. The range of people at university is thought to be much greater than schools or in workplaces.

I think here there are so many more people with different people, so many backgrounds so many interesting people, whereas if you were in the same job for four years you'd just make friends with people in that area, in that job... London Biol. F8.

Norwegian students also felt it was valuable to make friends who share common interests. This was thought to add to their learning and give an opportunity to discuss their subject.

[You make] friends that have the same interests, which you can discuss your common interests with and learn from. Oslo Biol. F5.

In contrast London students (in both Biology and economics) relate the social value of their time at university to 'networking': meeting people who might be useful contacts for their working lives.

You also meet people who can help you, when you leave university, and want to do something...like contacts. London Biol. F6.

Independence and maturity

For many students, coming to university was their first experience of independence: moving away from their home and parents, learning to motivate and organise themselves and

generally learning to look after themselves. There were similar to this issue across groups, although they were emphasised more by biology groups.

I think it was one of the reasons I wanted to come to uni in the first place, just to learn to live alone. You're away from your parents, if I'd got a job I would have had to have stayed with my parents, I wouldn't have been able to escape. London Biol. F6.

This experience was felt to bring all sort of personal development but particularly maturity and responsibility. The experience of independence was clearly quite daunting but is cushioned at university by everyone being in a similar situation.

It would have been too big a jump [to move out and start work]. Here at least there are other people in my position, whereas with work, you're on your own really. London Econ. F4.

6.2.3 Advantages in jobs and careers

The role of a degree in finding work and expanding job opportunities was a priority for all groups. Almost all students wrote a post-it related to jobs³¹. However views varied about how their degree was valuable in terms of work. Benefits such as 'finding a better job' required more discussion to establish *how* a degree was anticipated to effect working life, and what defined a better job. National differences emerge in the relative importance of various aspects of work and careers: interesting or fulfilling work is the priority in Oslo, with high pay as a secondary advantage, while high paying work or competitive advantage in applying for jobs is seen as crucial in London, with interest in work as a bonus.

Employability and broader opportunities

Students expected a degree to give them much broader opportunities than non graduates. A good degree is seen an asset in finding work, most fundamentally because students believe that more and more jobs, and most better jobs (however defined) require a degree as standard.

I think to get a job you need a degree. It's a requirement. If I didn't have one I wouldn't get hired... now you need a masters or PhD. London Econ. F4.

In Norway you need higher education to get the jobs you want. Oslo Econ. F3.

³¹ in Oslo, most students in both groups wrote a Post it linked to jobs, in London all did

As the comment above suggest, there are some concerns that as bachelors degrees become commonplace, they offer weaker advantages. A bachelor is now seen as a ‘minimum’ but not, in itself enough for securing access to more desirable or competitive jobs.

Nowadays, I think everyone is taking a bachelor. It’s not like ‘oh you’re taking your bachelors!’ It’s just like ‘of course you’re taking a bachelors. And a masters is almost like ‘of course’ you’re on a masters too, but it’s a bit more prestigious. Oslo Biol. F6.

This common concern that a bachelors degree is losing value led to different national responses. In London, this seemed to underline their concerns about needing a more prestigious degree, based on a high grade and high-status institutions and subjects. Norwegian students’ views that a bachelors degree was now the norm seemed to support their greater interest in taking a masters. Expansion of bachelors degree courses seem to increase the sense hierarchy between degrees and courses amongst English students while in Norway it seems to shift perceptions about ‘advanced’ education upwards.

Subject and national differences in views on jobs and careers

Work aspirations and views on the role of a degree in meeting these aspirations varied a great deal. Therefore, each groups’ core views are set out below to illustrate differences in the way value was constructed in students discussions and descriptions of the ‘best case’ scenario that could follow from university. These differing views are also summarised in table 15.

For Oslo biologists, a bachelors degree was thought to have quite limited value as a stand-alone qualification with fairly limited, low-status career opportunities.

If you just have a bachelors you have to be a teacher, or at least that’s the most obvious option. Oslo Biol. F8.

Despite these immediate limitations, in the longer term it was seen as a valuable step in most students’ plans, moving them closer to interesting and meaningful roles they thought would suit them, often involving a Masters or research, or jobs directly related to their degree. Compared to the other groups, Oslo biologists had quite varied ideas about what made a ‘good’ job: they put less emphasis on pay, and much more on personal interest, challenge, variety and doing work they saw as meaningful in describing their best-case scenario.

M1: [Good jobs are] jobs similar to your interests.

M4: Every day is not the same.

M2: You do something that has a meaning to you...you feel you do something useful.

F5: To look forward to going to work on Monday, that's my main goal. To miss work on the weekends.

F7: A good job, where you like what you do and learn all the time.

In contrast, economics students in Oslo felt their bachelors were a strong qualification, opening many doors due to its relevance and application in many sectors. However, those advantages were expected to be strengthened by specialisation and most wanted to go onto a masters to gain more in-depth knowledge and greater opportunities.

You can work on anything you want, because economy is important everywhere. You have all the options. Oslo Econ. F3.

What we have here we can build on - I chose the bachelor because it gave me more free subjects - and you can just have the masters later if you want that. Oslo Econ. M2.

In this group desirable or good jobs were seen as those using their skills and subject knowledge, but also which are useful or meaningful in some ways. Their 'best case' scenario focused on challenging work, with pay mentioned amongst other aspects of a satisfying life.

They've got a well paid job and a bit of freedom or responsibilities. Maybe they managed to climb a bit in the company they work in so they have some leadership, freedom and flexibility. Maybe they're also working in volunteer organisations, maybe helping a lot of people. This person has felt, 'I got a lot out of [my degree]'. Oslo Econ. M2.

London economists also thought their degree would impress employers, both due to UCL's reputation and the subject being seen as difficult. It was expected to lead them into quite specific, high status sectors such as finance or, in some cases, the contrasting area of international development which was also competitive, but less well paid.

With economics you can kind of go in two directions. You can help with development, or you can do the money thing. So I can decide now, I haven't decided yet. London Econ. F4.

High pay was more important to these students in general and was prioritised over other features of 'good' jobs in some comments, though interesting work would be a 'bonus'. These students 'best case' scenarios underscored these priorities. Ideally their prestigious degree will provide a competitive edge in finding high-paid work, typically in finance.

For me, and it's going to sound superficial, but it is about salary. If I'm earning a lot of money I'll feel like I've done something with my degree...I really want to be in the position where I can have a comfortable, nice lifestyle, but at the end of the day I wouldn't do a job just for money. London Econ. F3.

I think as soon as they graduated, they got a job working for a bank, and they just went on to be promoted and promoted, and now their chief executive officer of a major firm. London, Econ. F4.

Last of all, the London biologists had quite varied expectation about the value a degree would bring to them in terms of careers or work related to differing aspirations: those who wanted to work or do research in natural sciences saw the degree as a foundation for further study, but many others were unsure of their plans and focused on their degree as a way of demonstrating broad capabilities and gaining a qualification suitable for work in a wide range of areas.

That's what people in business want though isn't it? They want someone with a degree in a real subject. Rather than a degree in business studies. Go and study something real, and then learn all the stuff you'd learn in business studies on the job. London Biol. M2.

Many of these students listed 'better job prospects' in the Post It exercise, and when probed on what better jobs meant to them they returned to competitive advantage: being in a strong position to pursue whatever job they want, although this is unclear for many of them, as yet.

It means you can get exactly what you want. If your one of the people at the top of the pile you can get first choice, you can be picky London Biol. M1.

Concerns about employment: worst case scenarios

Despite quite varied views about what defined a good job, and best case scenario, students across all groups described a similar scenario when asked to describe a 'worst case' outcome where they would not feel their job was worthwhile: low paid, low status or boring jobs or being unemployed. The global and national uncertainty in economic conditions were mentioned surprisingly rarely, but when they were seemed to simply contributed to a broader sense that finding a job has become more difficult, as so many with similar qualifications will be competing. Although the worst-case vision was similar, London students saw this as a more likely and were more concerned about their employment prospects.

I'm scared, there are a lots of other people at good universities, getting the same degrees, good degrees as well, and they're in the same situation as us, looking to get the same jobs as us...London Econ. F3.

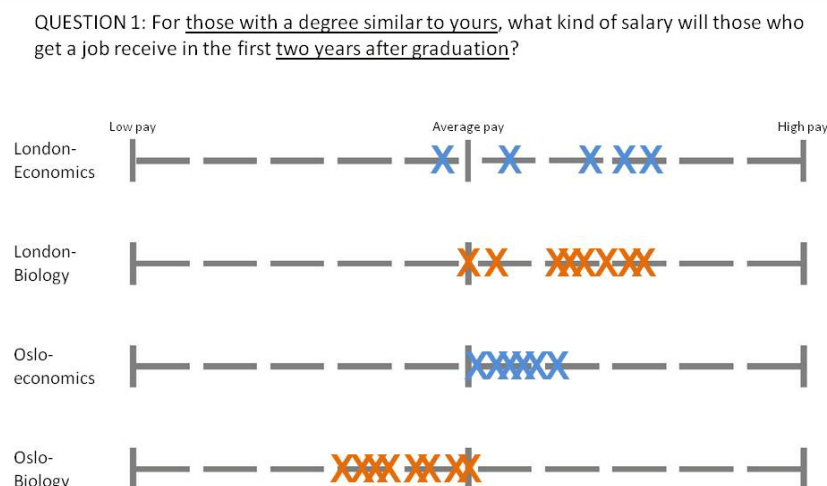
In Oslo, economics students had ‘occasionally’ heard about unemployed graduates but were more concerned about not being able to find work they felt made real use of their degree or was repetitive and unchallenging. Biology students thought jobs were scarce, but that as most jobs in Norway are reasonably paid they would find something acceptable, if not ideal:

*If you’ve got a job in Norway, and a degree, they can’t pay you like s***. They have to pay a certain rate. You’re making a decent living - you’re not rich. Oslo Biol. F5*

6.2.4 The financial value of a degree: what’s expected and why?

The results of the pay expectation exercises showed a similar pattern of expected financial benefits between the four groups (see appendix 10 for results from Question 2).

Figure 11: Results from question 1: Expected position on pay scale



This reflects ROR data to some extent: London students generally expect more of a wage premium than those in Oslo, and in Oslo economics students expect more than biologists. However, London Biologists and economists have similar expectations. Indeed London economists have quite modest expectations, although RoR data suggest they would receive high premiums and the group placed more emphasis on plans to go into high pay work. Oslo biologists had low expectations, possibly reflecting the narrow opportunities they associated with a bachelors level biology qualification only.

Discussions around the pay exercises illustrated several points of difference, as well as some problems the exercise itself. Students seemed unsure how to ‘frame’ their answers, as they weren’t sure what average pay would be or if they were comparing their expectations with overall pay distributions, or just with their peers. The specified two years after graduation also

seemed to be important in explaining modest expectations. Students assumed they would be in a first job with a low starting salary and that at least initially, non-grads would benefit from more work-experience. Pay advantages and financial value from their degree were expected to emerge over time, through a steeper gradient of pay increases than non-graduates could expect.

Even if you've got a degree, you'll have to work your way upwards. Oslo Biol. F4.

A difference might be that a graduate is more likely to get a job with prospects... It's not just 'this is your salary, you'll never get any more'. London Biol. M1.

English students put more emphasis on the importance of higher pay and some stated that receiving substantially higher pay as a graduate, even if it took a few years, was absolutely necessary to make their degree worthwhile.

I definitely expect more. I mean, I wouldn't expect to go through all this hard work and get the same pay as someone who didn't, I'd think 'what was the point'. I've worked this hard not just to get higher prospects but because I expect to get higher pay. London Biol. F4.

The results from this exercise clarified attitudes to work more generally, but did not provide a very clear comparison of expectations regarding the financial value of a degree. In part these problems reflected participants being unsure exactly what comparison they were making (see 7.2) but also their low awareness of pay distributions and for many, uncertainty about their career plans and priorities.

6.2.5 Wider benefits of HE: Is your degree valuable for others?

Students' views on how their degree and learning might be valuable or important for those around them varied between Oslo and London. Family benefits were mentioned across groups; both parental pride and being a good example to your own children, or younger relatives, were mentioned as benefits for those around them (in Oslo and London).

My mum and dad will be really proud, and if I had kids if they know I've had the motivation to do that it might inspire them London Econ. F3

In both Oslo groups, the idea that HE could be useful more broadly to society or others was quite familiar, and was raised spontaneously. London students struggled with these topics even when prompted: when asked if their degree might bring benefits to others beyond their family, many were confused or tentative and others seemed embarrassed.

This might sound cheesy, but I do hope to get the type of job where you can help other people or have an impact on society and give something back... for want of a better phrase. I mean I know that every job benefits someone in some way... London Econ. F2.

The most tangible social benefit London students suggested was contributions to research by students and graduates, though few planned to take such routes themselves. Norwegian students also mentioned these benefits and related them more directly to their own plans.

Doing research you'll be, in a small way, pretty much guaranteed to gradually be expanding the boundaries of human knowledge, that's the way science is. Then there's the once in the blue moon leap of genius. London Biol. M2.

The idea of living in a knowledge society (or at least a society more than ever dependent on knowledge) was also raised in both cities, in suggestions that modern society requires and benefits from a higher level of knowledge overall and that skills from HE are in demand.

You could say that Norway is more of a knowledge society. There's more knowledge based jobs than practical jobs Oslo Biol. M4.

Yeah [degree level education benefits other], they do research, and a society that is better educated has a better chance of succeeding than a society where people aren't really educated" London, Econ. M5.

In Norway, both subject groups found it relatively easy to discuss societal benefits from HE. Biologists placed emphasis on the value of scientific research and knowledge; economics students on how a better understanding of the world, economies and nations led to good decisions and problem-solving. Both Oslo groups felt contributing to wider needs and doing something meaningful or useful was part of the value of their degree, and part of good jobs.

It's the chance to do something more important in your work, if I started working now, I'd just do the same thing, maybe it's kind of cheesy, but it's a chance to do something more useful for the world...it's hard to say exactly what, just something important, like maybe saving lives Haiti and coming up with new economic models that can help people...Oslo Econ. M1.

Norwegian students also thought they could contribute to others by passing on what they had learnt informally, and by taking a part in more informed debates.

And as an individual's we're all part of the society, so if one person makes themselves more aware, it sort of, sums up, to everyone being more aware. Oslo Biol. F6.

6.3 How do students construct degree value? Group identity and metaphor

The discussion so far has described the views expressed in groups quite directly. Several themes also emerged during analysis, based on interpretations of the comments made and how students expressed their views. This more interpretive analysis is discussed here. Vicsek (2010) warns against neglecting the group context in analyses of discussion groups, and thesis issue reflect that. Students views were expressed in a group setting, making the way they presented their views, and responded to others views, a matter of social interpretation: how students sought to establish group identities or norms, and the way they used language to make their point help clarify how they construct degree value and the meaning of HE.

Group phenomena: Group identity, norms and exceptions

One clear feature of ‘group phenomena’ did emerge (Vicsek, 2010); dominant group identities or norms were suggested, and these proclaimed identities were more polarised than the overall balance of views expressed across the different groups. At various points statements were made about what ‘most students’ on the course thought or did.

Encouragingly, some individuals openly disagreed with those asserted group norms, suggesting pressures for conformity were not too acute for free discussion. The most marked contrast in group identities emerged between the London economists and the Oslo biologists. These groups expressed their identities most forcefully, and these are discussed in more detail. Similar, less extreme and distinct views were raised by the other groups.

The Oslo biology students’ identity was defined by a strong intrinsic orientation and commitment to their subject area. Members of the group stated early on that their subject attracts people with a genuine interest in nature, irrespective of the narrow or limited job prospects associated with the subject; this marked their area out as special and a contrast to other subjects (including economics). This perceived exceptionalism is a source of pride, establishing an identity defined by genuine interest and passion, not the pursuit of pay or status.

I think some subjects are for people that would like to make money. If you take [biology] you’re not like ‘oh I’m going to be rich’, that’s not the main goal of everyone here, but in other subjects it might be... like economics! Oslo Biol.F8.

We’re very passionate about our subject and the things we learn... Oslo Biol. F8.

This identity was referenced throughout the discussion. Two students in the group who felt prospects and pay *were* important were clearly conscious of going against this norm.

Well, personally, I think anyone saying 'oh well I don't care about money at all' is lying. Of course you can think it is not that important, but it is in your mind... Oslo, Biol. M4.

Most of the group seemed to feel there was a tension between the value of a degree in terms of interest or knowledge, and value in high-pay or high-status careers: they felt they had to make a choice between interesting, fulfilling roles or high pay in their own decisions.

I think it depends where you aim. Some are very obsessed with pay. So for those more interested in the pay, there are always a possible ways, to sacrifice some of your interests to get a higher payment. But for those [like me] who want to have a work life in biology which pays my living, and want to get to have fun every day at work, I don't think you should aim so high on the ladder for payment... you prioritise one or the other. Oslo Biol. M1

In contrast, the London economics students' identity was much more instrumentally oriented, and built up around the narrow range of careers seen as typical for UCL economics graduates:

It kind of just seems like in economics when the lecturers are speaking to you that they assume everyone in here wants to be a banker. London Econ.M1

Again there was a sense of a trade-off being made, but in the opposite direction to the Oslo biologists. London economics students' comments made it clear many saw it as a useful, but uninspiring subject, leading to jobs where boredom or stress was compensated with pay.

I've noticed for the majority [the plan after graduation] is banking. It's like an investment banking factory this course. A lot of them do it just to make the money and then go on and 'do good'. You can't do the banking thing for ever. You make your money and then you go and do the [international] development thing. London Econ. F4.

Indeed the opposition between the typical finance route, and the alternative route of work in international development, reveals a trade-off in working priorities almost the opposite of the Oslo Biologists: while some hoped to move into subjects such as law or development, and expected these to be more interesting, the lower pay and prestige were seen as a serious barrier. A couple of economics student who rejected these norms underlined this group identity as typical amongst most of their peers.

I think most students pick a subject they like. In my course [economics], I've realised, most people want a career in banking. I wasn't really expecting that. I think that's a bit weird, to already have decided what you want to go into... I think it's quite specific to all the business based degrees. I guess a student studying French likes the subject, and doesn't know what he wants to do later. Economics students [are] more careers focused. London Econ. M5.

How is value explained and constructed? Metaphor and description

The metaphors and descriptions used by students are also illuminating. Patterns of description illustrate national differences about how the value of a degree is positioned, as a stage of life, a benefit and an experience. These metaphors clarify show how students frame value of their degrees, and where the same ideas or images are found repeatedly, this suggests strong norms and narratives at work in each country.

London students focus heavily on competition and credentialism. They position university as offering a qualification that is important for them to establish a good position in a competitive social hierarchy and they reveal their sense of needing to constantly seek a competitive edge. Overall, a degree is firmly constructed as means to an end more than an end, or experience in itself. Without question, most London students were enjoying their experience of university, and felt it would benefit them in many ways. However, their descriptions of the role their degree would play tended to involved quite mechanistic metaphors and repeated references to gaining competitive advantage in a high stakes context; this was particularly clear in expectations about how their degree would determine their position in job hunting as graduates.

It's like getting yourself to ground zero with jobs nowadays really. London, Biol. M2.

It just gives you a platform. You've done this thing, and shown you can do it, and it gives you the opportunity to do a lot more things... London Econ. F2.

Degrees are primarily seen as a minimum qualification for finding work. Degrees were also positioned as the latest step in ongoing processes to sort and filter people into a clear hierarchy, following from exams at school, and preceding fierce competition for jobs.

I think with job opportunities these days, people are being put into boxes: 'has a degree', 'doesn't have a degree', 'has work experience'... if you've ticked five out of the ten boxes, instead of two, you're more likely to go further. London Econ. M1.

Indeed, the persistent focus on how a degree might help in getting a first job demonstrated the quite narrow time frame London students considered, rarely raising points about how their overall career path might be effected. London students also tended to define the experience of university in opposition to life before and after: as a time of relative freedom and security between high-pressure school years and a daunting, hard, working life. A sense of fearfulness and uncertainly cuts through many comments and may explain repeated ideas about university

offering security, a chance to develop resilience for adult life, allowing a 'trial run' at life in a relatively sheltered and structured environment and a degree being a backup plan.

It's kind of like a trial run on life... like a taster. [In a lot of ways] it is like moving to a new town and starting a new job, but it's a bit more safe, your life is more structured for you, and there lots of people in the same situation. London, Biol. M2.

Similar ideas were evident amongst students who lacked a sense of direction: university offered time to reflect on plans without the high pressures associated with schools and exams.

Secondary school is all about how many A grades did you get. Every little thing has to be right... I guess if you know what you want to do, and it doesn't require a degree, you can just go and do it, but I have no idea what I want to do. London Econ.F2.

Oslo students' employed quite different descriptions when talking about their degrees. Although some were concerned about finding work, they described what a degree meant to them in broader, less instrumental terms. The experience of university was repeatedly described as 'a path', and as part of 'self development'. The university environment was not seen as a 'breather' from stress, but a quite active and challenging time, that makes self-development, new interests and learning almost inevitable.

I think when you go to university you sort of know what's expected from you, there is this path, you are going to go along and you will develop, you will learn something more. Oslo Biol. F6.

The metaphor of university as a path or process of development captured the more personal attachment Oslo students seemed to have to their courses and career plans. It was thought to be important for each student to find a degree that is right for them, as raised in discussions on subject choices and changing courses. Students saw different subject areas as 'branches' that relate to one another, build broad knowledge and which will eventually lead to the right course. Oslo students therefore saw changing course as inconvenient but well worth it, to find a clear, fulfilling sense of direction through their degree.

Many students, start something and switch and then switch again, and study their whole life. That's ok. But I think you need to go along the path, you need to find out what you want. Oslo Biol. F7.

The importance of finding the right path seemed to be linked to the longer timeframe Oslo students took regarding the impact of their degree. They discussed how HE would shape their careers not just in finding a first job, but in providing opportunities and benefits in the long

term. This seems to contrast sharply with London students' views. Indeed, many Oslo students' ideas about working life seemed clearer, more thought out and less anxious.

I think that's correct, that you [need to] like what you do, seeing as you have to do it for forty years. Oslo, Econ, M1.

A last difference in descriptive styles between the London and Oslo students was the extent to which they saw different elements of their university experience as integrated, and mutually supporting, or as separate elements of their life. For many Oslo students their studies, lifestyle and career and life aspirations were described as closely inter-linked: the experience of being a student seemed to hang together. The unique aspect of university was created by the combination of academic challenges, social variety and opportunities for personal growth and development.

You're not only developing your social skills and independence, but you develop mentally, because you study something. You don't only have to take care of yourself but the studies, to make progress, to become something more than you were. Oslo Econ. M2.

It gives you a reason, it gathers people from many different backgrounds places and life experiences, and put them together. It gives you an opportunity to get to know different people, different from yourself. But who often also have the same basic interests, for example biology, who have a fascination for nature. Oslo Biol. M4.

In London, the benefits of a degree seemed more fragmented. While the social experience of university was very important, it was quite separate to their studies. The different elements of university life existed side by side, rather than forming one overall experience:

I think at university you make the experience good if you do a lot next to a degree, alongside it, but that's not really a benefit if a degree... London Econ. M5.

6.4 Overview and comparison of students' views

This strand of the study explored students' views about the value of their degree through a series of discussion groups; the analysis sought to clarify national and subject differences or similarities in views. As set out in the methodology chapter, this small-scale qualitative approach allows for understanding and insights to be generated, but does not provide a basis for widely generalisable findings; the conclusions drawn from this strand are exploratory inferences (Patton, 2002). They offer tentative evidence about national and subject differences, which must be interpreted in light of the tightly drawn sample involved.

Differences do seem to be present between London and Oslo groups, and between Economics and Biology students. These two levels proved very useful in analysis, offering a sense of perspective on how significant differences found between nations were. While there do seem to be national differences at work there is also a substantial degree of within country variations in attitudes, between subject groups and individuals students. Where national contrasts identified remain clear and consistent across the subject groups, this suggests they may well indicate broader national differences that would benefit from further investigation.

The analysis of students' comments showed that the priority placed on different kinds of value, and on different narratives, varied. In London benefits related to jobs and careers were more important to most students than learning or the experience. In Oslo views were more diverse, depending on individuals' specific aspirations: many in the economics group focused more on work benefits, while many biologists focused more on learning and knowledge.

Summary of key points

Most students had taken a degree based on an unquestioned, long-standing assumption that university was expected for those who did well in school. A considered weighing up of the value of a degree, or costs and benefits involved is not evident. Instead a degrees' value is assumed and attendance seems to be driven by social expectation, and more explicit pressures in England. This suggests that RoR data or patterns of return are a less important, or at least ill-defined factor, in students' HE decisions. It also aligns well with Trow's (1974) theory that degrees come to be seen as an 'obligation' rather than a right or privilege in universal systems.

Marked differences emerge in how students chose their subject. A stronger tendency towards instrumentalism and credentialism is evident in London: students focused on the value of degrees in traditional, broad subjects that would impress employers. In Oslo interest in the subject or aspirations to go on to further study or work in related areas were more important. This seemed to link up with differences in how students constructed and frame knowledge and education benefits (see table 15); while biology students in both countries laid more emphasised on knowledge and learning in general, students in London, and those in economics groups, focused less on the value of learning and knowledge.

Table 15: Summary of different groups views on the main benefits of a degree

Benefits in terms of:	London Econ	London Biol	Oslo Økon	Oslo Biol
Knowledge/ education is most valuable in terms of:	Demonstrating in-demand skills and abilities that lead into high-pay and competitive sectors	Demonstrating transferable skills and qualities thought to be desirable amongst employers OR as foundation for further studies/ research	Developing skills and insights about how the state/economy works, which can be widely applied in useful, meaningful work.	Developing knowledge about an important, interesting subject for further studies, research or work in related areas.
The uni. experience is valuable as:	A breather and chance to reflect: A break from pressure and bridge into the competitive, challenging world of work. A chance to think about what to do and develop resilience and maturity.		A path to self-development: A quite rich experience academically and socially, that opens up opportunities for a more interesting life and allows students to find a clear path/sense of purpose.	
Degrees are valuable in jobs/ careers in terms of:	A step up to a more <i>competitive position</i> for 'good', high-status jobs primarily in the financial sector.	A solid qualification that demonstrates <i>a range</i> transferable skills, improving access to 'good' jobs in any sectors.	A base of knowledge and skills directly related to a <i>range</i> of <i>useful</i> , professional roles in a range of sectors.	A first step towards <i>interesting and enjoyable</i> jobs within sectors directly linked to biology.
What is a good job?	High pay is vital, well- respected professional roles, and also interest /relevance to econ. For some. Pay prioritised over interest.	A wide range of views, linked to differing aspirations (research, business, creative sectors). Pay an important factor alongside others.	A challenging, varied, meaningful job the priority for some, high status and pay important for others- both is best and seen as possible.	One closely related to Biology, and which is enjoyable, interesting and (for some) meaningful. Interest prioritised over pay.
Other benefits of a degree mentioned	- Gain insights into business world - Develop contacts and networking skills	- Time to think about career plans - Sense of achievement - Sense of direction	-Transferable/general skills developed	- Gain motivation /self-discipline - Fulfil parents' wishes

Employability and career opportunities are central to most students' views on degree value, and this is underlined by a sense in all groups that degrees are more and more widely required for any professional or challenging job. However, expectations about how a degree will be beneficial, and what counts as a good career, vary (see table 15). This seemed to relate to broader national differences in students' expectations about work and personal aspirations or

plans. In general, London students were unclear about their future plans, some approaching their degree as a general qualification which simply opened doors into professional work. London students also and tended to consider the role their degree would play in the short-term: the main career advantage offered by a degree was framed as a competitive edge into a first job after university. In Oslo most students seemed to have a more developed sense of direction, not least due to the prevalent opinion that a degree subject should be chosen quite carefully with interests and long-term plans in mind. They framed their degree as offering a more satisfying career and lifestyle in the long-term, and for most this would ideally be in an area related to their degree.

The university experience is also important to all students, but students' descriptions of it suggest it is quite different in Oslo and London. In London the experience is more fragmented and defined in opposition to challenging, competitive experiences before and afterwards (at school and work). This fragmentation contrasts strongly to the quite integrated experience described by Oslo students, of their degree as a path that leads to self-development and a sense of direction.

Students in Oslo were more comfortable with the idea of their education might spillover into benefits for those around them and society in general, while in London this topic was challenging for most participants beyond benefits to immediate family.

Narratives about value and students views

Looking back to the framework of four broad narratives about the value of HE and a degree, and the hypothesised features of students' views expressing these narratives (tables 2 and 3), it is clear than a blend of these ideas and narratives are at work in both countries. The least evident narrative is the welfare state or social mobility narrative; this was rarely referenced in groups and the idea of making HE access easier through reduced costs met with a mixed reaction, as most students did not want HE to be taken for granted, and thought this could water-down standards. It may be that this narrative was simply harder to discuss as it involved broad patterns and values which are less easily related to individual experiences.

The other three narratives were clearly evident in both countries and seemed to fit quite well with the range of benefits students expected from their degree.

However the group identities suggest that students feel they have to trade-off between differing HE narratives, or between degree benefits, to some extent. This was apparent in discussions of employment benefits and academic interests: a focus on ones' interests in making degree choices or career choices was seen by some as involving a trade-off against employment prospects and pay. Other theoretically opposed values seemed much more compatible; discussions of knowledge saw it defined as valuable in ways that reflected a spectrum of ideas that moved back and forth from strongly instrumental to strongly intrinsic values. Indeed individual students seemed to value both qualities of knowledge, in line with Ziman's (1996, as cited in Bleiklie & Byrkjeflot, 2001) argument that different ideas about the desirable production and use of knowledge tend to work alongside each other. Views about employment illustrated important variations within this overall narrative: while most participants saw their degrees' role in their future working life as crucial, this importance and impact took many different forms, and was linked to very different values depending on their aspirations. Those students with a strongly instrumental orientation in London, who placed high pay above all else, clearly aligned with a strong economic narrative, but there were many more who wanted their degree to open to doors to jobs that would be paid reasonably well, but more importantly, that align with their interests and sense of purpose, mixing elements from all three narratives together to justify the value of a degree in shaping working life.

National differences in values do seem to be illustrated by the differing emphasis on, and relationships between, these three more common narratives. In Oslo, over the two groups, there seemed to be a reasonable balance in emphasis across these narratives, with the economic group leaning more towards economic/employment ideas and biologists towards the cultural/intellectual ones; both groups expressed as strong sense that their degree studies were important in terms of personal development. In the London groups the economic and employment narratives were clearly dominant, although individual students drew on quite different mixes of the other narratives in discussions; the cultural and intellectual ideas were more prominent amongst biology students, while neither group raised self-development narratives as strongly as those in Oslo. Interestingly, the Oslo groups related HE to social benefits more confidently including references to their own capacity to take on challenging, meaningful and socially useful jobs. Students in London found it much harder to engage with narratives about wider benefits for society, suggesting a strong individual orientation towards the value of a degree.

A wider range of narratives and ideas about degree value were presented by Oslo students and these seemed to be integrated into an overall sense of the unique university experience, defined by a combination of personal development, intellectual challenge and improved opportunities. Indeed, those students whose course choice, interests and aspirations fitted together most neatly seemed to embody Light's (2001) conclusions about the benefits that can emerge for students when their academic and social university experiences are inter-linked, by common threads or interests. In London, the focus on employment and the fundamental requirement for a degree level qualification to enter into competition for better jobs seemed to draw so much attention from students that social, cultural and academic values were pushed into the background.

7 Discussion and concluding remarks

The findings and conclusions set out here are based on comparisons of secondary data and a small-scale qualitative study. In light of this they are presented as illustrating possible contrasts and trends regarding the two countries, not robust evidence of overall national differences. The discussion groups suggest there may be extensive variation within each country, in how the value of a degree is understood. In particular, attitudes to HE seem to vary by degree subjects and in some cases this subject difference may be greater than any national difference. If this research topic were investigated to take account of a wider range of subjects or professional/vocational degrees, the range of views found might vary considerably. Institution type may also shape views, and this study cannot account for this issue, as it is based on two traditional research universities. Furthermore, bringing together and interpreting the different perspectives on value inevitably requires some subjective judgement, and involves further steps of interpretation and assessment of the meaning of the results and patterns identified in each strand.

Accepting these limitations, this concluding chapter aims to bring together findings from the three strands, consider implications for national HE systems and reflect back on some of the debates and issues raised in the opening chapters. It will also assess the strengths and weaknesses of the research approach and outline possible avenues for further research.

Summary of research questions addressed

This study investigated the value of a degree through three strands of research focused on the financial value of a degree, recent policy trends, funding systems and students' views. These issues have been considered and discussed in the relevant chapters (4-6). This closing discussion focuses on triangulating between and integrating the findings to address the over-arching research questions:

- Is there evidence that students' views are influenced by measures of financial value (such as RoRs), policy and funding systems in their home country?
- Do the different constructions of value (from each strand) fit together? How might they be related? Are they mutually supporting or are they in tension?
- What are the overall similarities and contrasts between the two countries in how degree and HE value is constructed?

These will be addressed by revisiting the four narratives about HE value (presented in section 2.2) and by presenting an overview of degree value for each country, based on a integrated, systems perspective.

7.1 Do findings reflect the four value narratives?

Four narratives of value were developed from a theoretical discussion about the role and importance of HE (see 2.2). This framework supported the research process: it provided an initial overview of the values ‘landscape’ that aided the development of a discussion guide for groups; it also served to highlight recurring tensions between intrinsic and instrumental values, and individual or social values, that were useful in comparing national policy and students’ views. The hypothesised student expressions of these narratives (see table 3) fit well with the key benefits that students raised in groups, and also aligned well with students’ attitudes to subject choice. This suggests the narrative framework does offer a meaningful, if simplified, summary of some key ideas about HE value that remain relevant. However, variations were apparent in how the narratives were constructed and expressed in each country. For example narratives related to economic and employment functions were widely discussed, but some saw improved employability in terms of interesting work, or work in areas related to their degree subject, while others saw employability as better access to highly paid jobs. Indeed, reviewing the narrative framework in light of these findings it seems likely that national differences are much more complicated than a simple four-part model can account for, in two ways. Firstly, the way that narratives were traded-off or prioritised was not easy to assess, as some aspects of policy or students’ views might position one narrative as a priority, while other narratives seemed to be referenced more widely, but with less force. The picture that emerges from national policy and students’ views is not of a clear hierarchy between the narratives, or a number of ‘pure’ narratives running in parallel, but of a mix of linked, and sometimes overlapping narratives. Secondly, while the same ‘headline’ areas were apparent in both countries, there seem to be distinct national ways of telling these stories in policy and students’ views. An overview of how these four narratives are translated in each country is set out in table 16.

Table 16: Narratives for value revisited: variations between Norway and England

	Cultural & intellectual	Self-development	Economic & employment	Welfare state & social mobility
England	Related to gaining general capabilities and skills and credentialist attitudes. Stronger academic/intrinsic values persist in relation to further HE and research	University seen as a secure environment to develop general maturity and qualities for working life.	A degree is a great investment for the individual and necessity for success. HE's primary value for the state is fostering growth and competitiveness.	A meritocratic vision: ability for all to compete to gain access to the advantages offered by a degree, with little reference to wider impacts on equality or financial risks inherent in HE.
Norway	Academic values of engagement in subjects and learning as a valuable in itself. Belief in intrinsic and applied value of learning and knowledge for individual and society.	University as a unique environment that fosters intellectual and personal development. A valuable civil and social institution.	An expanded and high quality HE sector will strengthen Norway's economic position and popular demand for more education and challenging, high-skill work.	Social traditions and norms of social justice and egalitarianism are embedded in HE structures and seen as central to HE's social value.

7.2 An integrated perspective on value

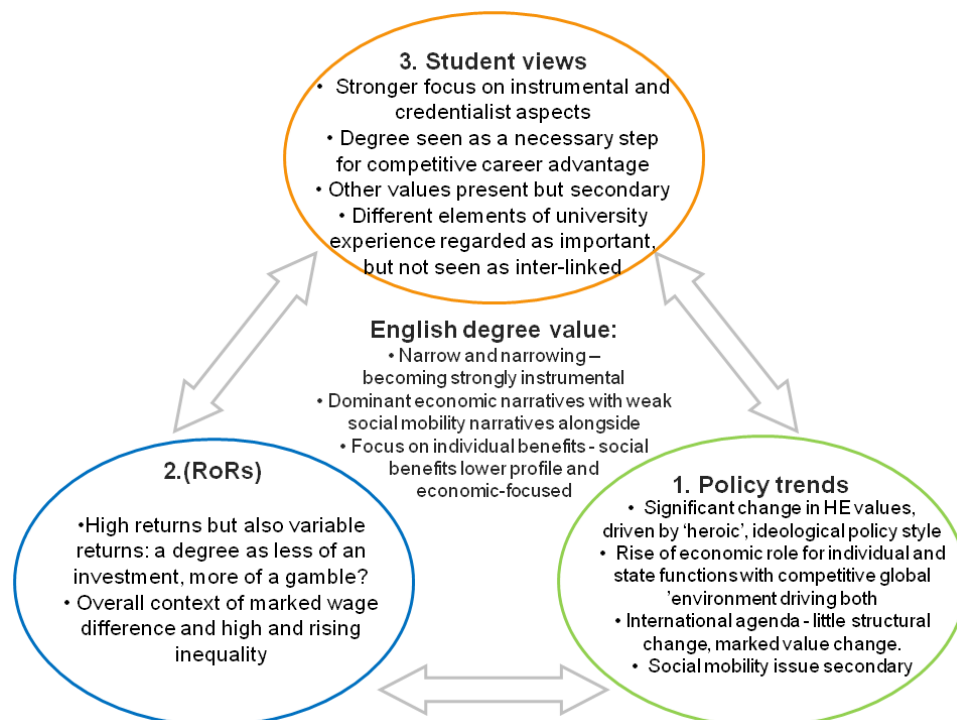
A hypothesis was put forward at the start of this study that the two countries would demonstrate quite contrasting perspectives on value, where policies, students' perceptions and financial outcomes were inter-linked and where these different factors reinforced one another and aligned with the wider national context. This drew on integrative and systems ideas, particularly those of Ritzer (1988). An integrated overview for degree value in each country is set out figuratively, summarising key features for each country, from each strand. These figurative summaries (12 & 13) are discussed in terms of the overall characteristics and national contexts they show, related to some of the broader contemporary issues that form the background to this study, and considered in terms of possible implications for national policy.

An integrated perspective on degree value in England

The findings suggest that degree value in England is characterised by a narrow and narrowing focus on instrumental and economic aims. There is also a tendency to see a degree as primarily a private good. Students' views seem to align with policy priorities and reflect the

high RoRs found. Indeed, high RoRs appear to have been very influential in policy decisions and rhetoric, having provided a rationale for new funding policies which involved rises in costs for students. A second theme in this system is competition: English students consider their degree as vital in pursuing jobs, and feel increasing pressure to have a high-status degree to be able to compete for better jobs. Competitiveness is also a central theme in policy, defining the central role of HE in economic growth, by supporting an internationally competitive knowledge economy.

Figure 12: The value of a degree in England: an integrated perspective



This integrated perspective on value seems to provide a coherent message: across all three strands economic and instrumental ideas are in the ascendant, while other narratives persist but with lower importance. This may undermine intrinsic values, with students' interest and engagement in specific subjects displaced by pressures to demonstrate transferable skills and general ability through a degree. The English context of high inequality and wage differentials also seems to be important in supporting these priorities and explaining how the strands fit together: degrees have taken on a greater importance in terms of work, due to the high stakes involved in employment structures and wage distributions, and this may help to explain students' general acceptance of fees and debts to get a degree.

The relationship between strands also seems to set a trajectory towards more 'economisation': the focus on individual returns in policy supports further cost-sharing and increases

expectations for high graduate pay, which in turn encourages more instrumental attitudes to degrees. This focus on the economic role of national HE systems, and a degrees' role in employment, is not necessarily negative; but in this case it seems to be accompanied by weakening social and educational values. As Ball (2008) suggests it may be that long-established ideas about the broader role of HE are 'collapsed' into economic aims. The low profile of policy narratives regarding HE's public contribution or social and cultural benefits, and students' discomfort and unfamiliarity with narratives about collective benefits of HE both suggest this may be occurring. While the different elements of value generally fit together, and support one another, a tension seems to be present between a funding system of standard costs for all degree courses, evidence of large variations in RoRs for different degree subjects and students' own perceptions of a strong hierarchy of value between degrees.

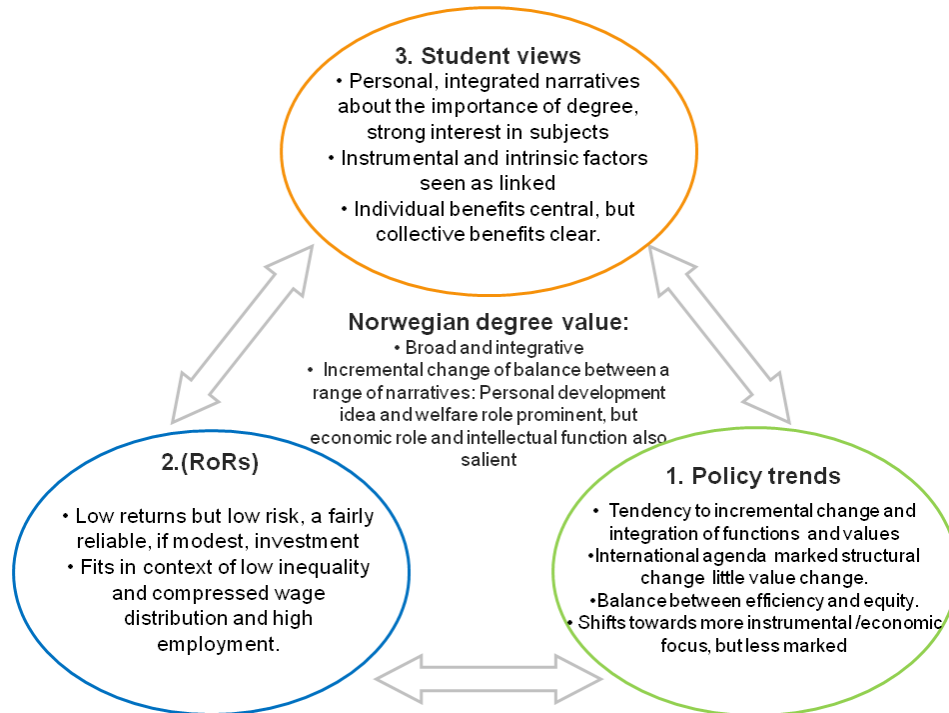
An integrated perspective on degree value in Norway

The findings suggest that Norwegian HE value is characterised by a broad range of narratives. Together, these present HE as an important private and public good. The Norwegian perspective arguably demonstrates a less clear or consistent relationship between the different strands because each strand contains a broader combination of narratives and values at work. This integrated perspective does not suggest a clear and stable hierarchy of importance between different HE roles or values. For students the main benefit of a degree varies considerably, some emphasise better job opportunities, while benefits related to self-development and more traditional academic values are influential in subject choice and career plans. This broader view of value seems to reflect the national policy approach, which has taken on a stronger economic and competitive focus in recent years, alongside efforts to maintain traditional values of egalitarianism and access, which remain central to the funding system. These broader interpretations of degree value found in policy and amongst students seem to be useful in explaining the apparent quandary posed by Norwegian RoR data: high demand for HE and high productivity, but low RoRs. It seems likely that the use of RoRs as an approximation of the incentive to attend HE is particularly limited in Norway, due to the many non-financial aspects of value that students, and the state, continue to emphasise.

The broader social and political context in Norway seems important in explaining the persistence of this range of values, as well as a funding system that goes against trends seen in most European countries. A system of fees would conflict with wider social and political

traditions, and efforts to increase RoRs by promoting higher graduate pay also seem limited by wider structures for pay-bargaining that compress wages and a redistributive tax system.

Figure 13: The value of a degree in Norway: an integrated perspective



The range of narratives present seem to imply some tensions, particularly between more recent international values and traditional national values. These tensions seem to balance each other out across the strands to produce a fairly stable, broad perspective on value. Accommodation between the narratives may well be based on smaller, ongoing shifts, rather than the steady and clear direction of travel suggested by the English model. However, this may be a fragile balance, and increased pressure for a more internationally competitive system, in terms of research output or new quality measures, may be difficult to accommodate without further changes across the strands and indeed in the wider social and political context.

Contrasts between these perspectives

The English perspective seems to place a greater emphasis on individual values and on instrumental values than the Norwegian one, where opposing values appear to be mixed in across the whole system. Altbach's (1999) suggestion that degrees are increasingly seen as a private good and benefits for society are sidelined fits well in the English perspective but Norway seems to go against this trend.

If the variations in RoRs for graduates are considered (instead of averages) this presents quite a different comparison between the strength of investment offered by a degree in each country. The idea of a degree as a good investment seems well established in England and this is borne out by average returns. However, variation in pay amongst graduates suggests a high level of risk involved in taking HE, based on large student loans. In Norway the wider context of small pay differences and high employment greatly reduces such risks. It may be that if the level of risk and variations in return were taken into account, a degree is no worse an investment in Norway than England. Indeed in some cases in, a degree in England might be better seen as a gamble; this is likely to be an increasingly important issue if HE costs rise, particularly as there is evidence that perceptions of the risks involved in HE vary considerably depending on students' background and wealth (Callender & Jackson, 2004).

The different dynamics within systems may reflect the broader tendencies in political culture. The English strands combine to create a clear trajectory and sense of momentum which contrasts with the more balanced, incremental Norwegian dynamic. This may be explained in part by the 'heroic' approach taken to HE policy in recent years in England, which introduced strong mechanisms to drive changes in values and functions, while Norwegian reforms have been more gradual and negotiated between a wider range of actors (Kogan et al., 2006).

The differing extent and rapidity of change may also reflect different patterns of influence from international and globalisation ideas. A high degree of congruence is evident between the political leanings of the UK government and the international ideas and globalization ideologies of this period (small state, pro market, high competition); in Norway the political culture clashes with these ideas, being welfare-state focused, wary of international market forces and having a history of exceptionalism. However, such patterns of influence based on macro level, subjective factors (such as international norms and ideologies), are extremely hard to investigate or demonstrate.

There seem to be grounds for suggesting national policy rhetoric and policy approaches, and the narratives found amongst students, reflect one other. Norwegian policy can be characterised as integrative, drawing on a mixture of social and private as well as intrinsic and instrumental ideas. The same characteristics were evident in how students in Norway described their views of HE and their emphasis on both interest in their subject and expectations of career benefits, in constructing degree value. In England, the narrower policy focus on economic and competitive rationales, and on concrete financial benefits, seems to

contain parallels to students' own sense of a degree as vital for success in a competitive environment and focus on high pay. Questions might be asked about the relationship between HE reforms and student views, and investigated further through a narrative analysis of government information aimed at school leavers and potential students.

7.3 Discussion of national integrated perspectives

A comparison of these figures, and the integrated perspective they provide on value for each country, raises some issues relevant to wider policy debates about European HE systems, that warrant further discussion and investigation. These are briefly discussed here, with suggestions for further research and key questions raised.

Increased pressure on HE funding and graduate employment

One of the rationales for this study was that HE funding was likely to come under increased strain in the coming years, as systems expand further and as the economic crisis bites. It was suggested that questions such as 'what do we think HE is for?' and 'what benefits does HE offer individuals and society?' may become more pressing. Three specific challenges are considered: increased pressure on funding; more challenging conditions for graduate employment and increased stratification of HE systems and degree value.

Public funding for HE is expected to be cut significantly in the coming years in many European countries (Eurydice, 2010). Without a rapid decline in HE places, this will require new funding from the state, students or other sources. The integrated perspective on value in England set out here supports a trajectory towards higher student costs, justified by high returns. However, it could well be that this will undermine cultural, academic and social values and roles. Alternatively, the proposal for two year degrees (see section 4.2) might lower degree costs lower but also promote the strong credentialist idea of a degree as simply a qualification or pass into employment. If such a strategy were pursued, investigations of the student attitudes towards such degree courses might help clarify if a shorter course does weaken narratives of self-development or intrinsic academic ideas, or if it is simply a more efficient way of providing access to HE, in a challenging economic environment. In Norway the integrated perspective suggests a high degree of public funding is locked in by the various strands, and the links between them. This may leave few options open beyond increasing state HE budgets. It will be interesting to see how far this trend can continue, and if Norway will continue to go against the international HE grain in terms of limited cost-sharing.

Both countries may also face increased pressure in terms of rising graduate numbers and more challenging labour markets. The OECD labour market forecast suggests that unemployment rates will exceed 10% in many OECD countries by the end of 2010 (OECD, 2009b) and the increase in the supply of educated workers across OECD countries was already raising concerns that the skills graduates bring to their job will exceed the skills required (Harmon and Walker 2001). If finding work, and particularly graduate level work, becomes harder the systems might face quite different challenges linked to student perceptions of their expectations about degree benefits being fulfilled. It could be suggested that the English system is more vulnerable to widespread resentment among graduates who feel they were misled about the financial benefits a degree would bring, who have large debts, but are either unable to find work or receive low pay. In Norway the risk might be suggested to be greater not in terms of disappointments linked to pay, but their high expectations about finding work that is interesting, challenging and aligns with their degree subject (see section 6.2). This creates pressure for Norway to develop in such a way that more graduate level jobs are created or see problems associated with overeducating, like those described by Wolf (2002a) where more graduates take non-graduate jobs leading to a 'waste' of educational investment by the state and potentially to dissatisfaction with work. A comparison of attitudes amongst unemployed graduates in the two countries might clarify these issues.

Increased stratification of HE systems and variations in RoRs to degrees

The RoR analysis raises the issue of variations in returns to a degree (see section 5). Students in England seemed to be aware of such variations, if only vaguely (6.2). However, this is rarely discussed in policy, and could be investigated in more detail in both HE systems, to clarify patterns of variation such as those mapped by Walker & Zhu (2001), and to clarify students' sense of the internal hierarchy of national systems. The English system seems particularly ill-equipped to address increased variation in graduate pay, without creating quite problematic side-effects. As returns to degrees vary substantially, but degree costs and fees are consistent. Variable fees may address unfairness in costs and benefits, but might also be expected to accelerate the stratification of the HE system further, and damage access, social mobility and equality. To some extent, the Norwegian context lessens these problems, as pay differences are lower, as are HE costs. If differences between returns to subjects increase, this may also be counter-balanced by students' stonger intrinsic interest, meaning that some subjects (such as biology) could remain attractive, despite low financial returns. Further

investigation of students who choose very low and very high return degrees, would be useful and interesting, to investigate their awareness of such differences and any impact on attitudes.

Links between attitudes to degrees and attitudes to work

One of the most interesting features of groups was how different attitudes were to work and career aspirations in each country. Work by those such as Ylijoki (2000) and Becher & Trowler (2001) suggests professional and working orientations, and attitudes to education, vary by discipline, which may account for difference between economic and biology students. A possible explanation of national differences might build on Cummings' (2003) argument that work systems and education systems tend to reflect one another. This could be explored through links between student and graduate perceptions of working culture and attitudes to HE. Cummings' (2003) model of differing work types suggest that Norway and the UK might be characterised by different working systems which are built around values and priorities that do seem to fit with some of the student views found in this study. This area may also shed light on the differing emphasis placed on social values in the two countries, as different professional and vocational orientations vary in how they present skills as being developed primarily as a way to serve society or to serve the individual (Ylijoki, 2000).

The expectation of HE attendance and the need for justification

Trow (1974) suggested that as HE attendance tipped over 50% of relevant cohorts, attending university would come to be seen as an obligation for those from many social groups. There does seem to be some evidence of this, based on most students in this study having long assumed or expected they would go on to HE. In such a context, it seems possible that national differences in attitudes to degrees may be based a fairly 'shallow' rationales, as the value of a degree is rarely questioned. In this case, students who unquestioningly attend HE may simply justify that decision once there, based on the most readily available, high-profile or obvious rationales. In Norway, the robustness of social and academic narratives may simply be due to high overall prosperity and security in working life: students must find justification or benefits for HE attendance beyond work and pay. This may play a part in biology students very strong group identity as a low pay, low-status subject: they are aware they are unlikely to gain any substantial wage premium, so must seek out and construct an identity which fill this gap. In the UK, even if students enjoy their subject and hope to go on and work in it, the very real and apparent difference between graduate and non-graduate

average pay and career options is likely to make them more aware of the role their degree will play in finding work.

Patterns of convergence

Finally, these integrated perspectives on value can be related back to the issue of the convergence of HE systems, which provided the background to this study. The central idea was set out (see section 1.4) that convergence is assumed to be taking place within European HE systems, where they are becoming more alike, driven by ideas of globalisation and the need to develop knowledge economies. This process is supported to some extent by the findings here, related to macro level factors. Similar ideas about the value of HE have become more important in both countries HE policy, in particular the idea that HE has a vital role to play in ensuring international competitiveness (see section 4.5). There are also signs of more similar HE structures, such as the new buffer agencies for quality and assessment processes introduced, which increase central governments' powers to steer HE systems (see section 4.5). However, underneath these macro level similarities, there seems to be considerable variation in how common policy ideas are implemented and how international values are built in alongside national practices and traditions. This seems to support the arguments set out by Arnove (2003, see section 1.4.3), that national and international forces work together through a dialectical process, creating distinctive national outcomes. Furthermore, the study also suggests there may be substantial individual and subject-group differences in how the role of HE and the value of a degree is constructed, which fit well with Becher & Trowler's (2001) academic tribes and Ylijoki's (2000) findings that students' values vary significantly across disciplines. In summary, it seems likely that a multiplicity of roles and values may persist well below national structures and policies, which combine to provide distinctive national perspectives on the value and importance of HE. This seems to undermine the assumption of the inevitable convergence of European HE systems.

7.4 Reflections on the research approach

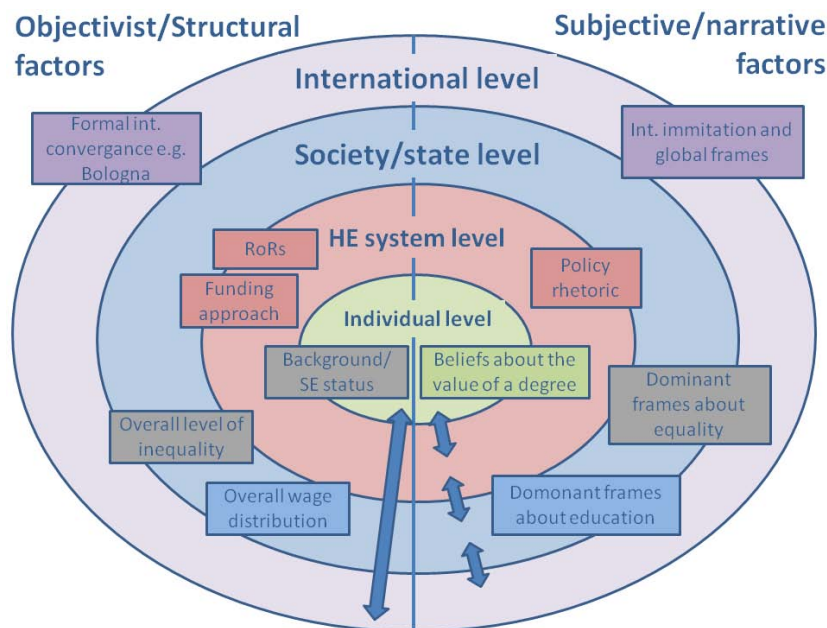
This discussion of the similarities and differences found in Norway and England addresses many issues, and raises several questions, that would not have been identified through a comparison of any one of the three perspectives on value in isolation. It does seem that national perspectives on value involve processes of interaction between different strands or

factors, which support one another, place limits on one another and justify one another. The different aspects seem to work together to create an overall sense of value, emerging through counterbalancing values and structures (Norway) or through mutually reinforcing values and structures, which create momentum and a trajectory of change (England). Such findings support the use of a systems approach, and underline the point that “The performance of a system is not the sum of the independent effects of its parts; it is the product of their interactions.” (Gharajedaghi and Ackoff, 1985, as cited in Patton, 2002:121)

Ritzer developed an integrative research approach in reaction to a tendency in social research to investigate aspects of social phenomena in isolation. He argued that “focusing on specific levels of social reality while paying little or no attention to the others” could undermine our understanding of issues, and make it impossible to establish how different factors are related to one another (Ritzer, 1988:511). These arguments seem to apply in this case. The ability to interpret RoR findings in light of broader data, context and students’ views of the value of a degree has been particularly striking. The study is able to offer quite different suggested explanations for the national differences in RoRs, than would emerge from a study framed by the human capital assumptions the OECD tends to draw on (see OECD 2008a). An integrated perspective, as set out in Figures 12 & 13, leads to conclusions and explanations, through a triangulation of factors, which would likely be overlooked, or simply be invisible, in a single method or single perspective approach. Thinking in terms of such systems or integrative models, at least when mapping out educational issues or attempting to interpret comparative measures, may help to support stronger explanations of national differences, and take more account of important differences in national contexts.

An integrative or systems approach does have some serious limitations, some of which are apparent in this study. First of all, this study still had to set quite strict limitations on what was included and left, both when selecting the perspectives that made up each strand, and in selecting sources investigated in each of them. Factors that may be important, indeed which could be more important, than those included, are still left out. A even broader perspective on national systems of HE value could be taken, which would include factors touched on, but not fully considered in this study, such as international normative frames or individual-level differences linked to family background. An example of such an expanded model is presented here (figure 14).

Figure 14: Suggested model for broader system of HE value



As this makes clear, an integrative or systems perspective may tend to push research towards larger and more complicated models and questions, and to attempts to integrate more and more factors. This presents a danger of developing studies which attempt to take account of everything, but fully investigate or clarify very little. Cummings (2003) notes that qualitative studies, or those which build in a wide range of cultural or social factors, can simply be too complex and unwieldy to function well in international comparison. As noted in the methodology for this study, there is always a trade-off to be made between breadth and depth.

Across all three strands, issues could have been looked at in more detail, to take account of a wider range of groups, or to cover a longer period. In attempting to offer a ‘broad sweep’ the final analysis will inevitably have to simplify and draw quite stark lines in identifying differences, where more complex dividing lines and variations in emphasis are present. In this regard, the sample structure has provided a valuable sense-check on apparent national differences: the subject differences serve as a reminder that while some national contrasts do appear to be present, there is also still extensive within-nation variation.

A final argument in favour of this approach, despite its limitations, is that an investigation of value that attempts to account for wider national contexts, and more subjective or ideological factors in HE systems, is useful at a time where national assessment systems and international comparisons both focus heavily on narrow, de-contextualised, and apparently ‘value-free’ measures such as RoRs.

Weaknesses or limitations in methodology: self-critique

In terms of methodological weaknesses, there are several issues that might have benefitted from a different approach. The investigation of students' expectation of wage benefits from their degree was not particularly effective (see 6.2.4 and appendix 10). This exercise was unclear and led to quite weak results; more concrete questions about pay expectations would have been preferable. It would also have been useful to look at expectations over time, for example expected pay for a first job, then one after ten years, as many students anticipated financial benefits from a degree to emerge quite gradually. Other issues that would usefully have been considered in more detail were students' sources of information and key messages about why they should (or should not) take HE. In England it was clear that schools were a powerful influence, providing explicit messages about the importance of university, and parental expectation and peer pressure also seemed to play a role in shaping expectation. Asking students more about the kinds of advice and information they had made use of in applying for university and choosing a degree might have helped to clarify how policy messages are passed on to students, via schools, and how their sense of the value of a degree is built up. A final critical perspective is that, while efforts were made to guard against a national bias in this study, the discussions and findings do focus more heavily on the English system, and analysis and implications were drawn out more confidently from the English data. While the core findings are sound, and the analysis process used guards against any systematic bias, this comparative study would doubtless have been improved by working in collaboration with a team members from Norway involved in fieldwork and analysis.

7.4.1 Looking forward: future avenues for research

This integrative, comparative perspective on degree value raises a number of interesting and timely topics for future. Some have already been mentioned in the sections above. Several particularly promising routes could be taken, to extend an investigation of this topic and related issues. Approaches could be used that would provide more robust and representative findings to follow up this study. A quantitative approach could be taken to the values and narratives about HE already considered, involving a questionnaire based around value statements that investigate national differences across a much larger sample. This would help to establish how significant any national differences in values are and, if applied to a large

sample, would allow insights into how views on the value of HE relate to degree subject, institution attended and individual characteristics of background or academic performance.

Attitudes to employment and motivation to take up a degree are another relevant area for further research. Harmon and Walker (2001) have noted that despite widespread interest and research into drivers of job satisfaction, little has been done to understand the link between job satisfaction and education. The attitudes found amongst students in this project suggest motivations for studying, factors driving degree choice and attitudes towards work may be quite different in Norway and England. These issues could be explored through longitudinal studies, assessing attitudes of students to their degree and following them up in their first graduate job, to see if links are evident between attitudes to degree-level study and issues such as motivation, work satisfaction and productivity.

Future avenues for an integrative approach to HE issues

Looking forward, an integrative approach could be useful in education research as a way to compliment and take further findings from more focused, in-depth studies. Systems models and integrative research approaches could be applied more widely to the many extensive, robust and comparable secondary data sources available for European countries. Data held by the OECD, The European Social Survey (ESS) and Eurydice offer such data sets, covering a wide range of educational and social issues. A systems or integrative perspective could be used to develop research questions that bring together data from these secondary sources, in innovative or unusual combinations. This could include projects which bridge subjective and objective issues, or investigate HE measures and trends in light of social and cultural differences (for example by using social attitudes data from the ESS). One example of such an approach might be to further investigate the relationship between RoRs and levels of inequality, an issue touched on in this study (see section 5.3). This could offer new insights into the cases and contexts where HE systems play a role in driving up overall inequality, or act to reduce it. In such ways systems or integrative approaches offer opportunities to make use of extensive, and often under-utilised, secondary data sources, to develop research projects and questions which can shed new light on complex issues, and which could offer more powerful explanations for national differences related to key education issues.

Glossary

Private internal rate of return: The rate of return represents a measure of the returns obtained, over time, relative to the costs of the initial investment in education. More specifically, the private internal rate of return is equal to the discount rate that equalises the costs of education during the period of study to the gains from education thereafter. In its most comprehensive form, the costs equal tuition fees, foregone earnings net of taxes adjusted for the probability of being in employment minus the resources made available to students in the form of grants and loans. (*OECD 2008 education at a Glance, Glossary*)

Social internal rate of return: The rate of return represents a measure of the returns obtained, over time, relative to the costs of the initial investment in education. More specifically, the social internal rate of return is equal to the discount rate that equalises the social costs of education to the social benefits of education. The social costs of education include the opportunity cost of having people not participating in the production of output and the full cost of the provision of education, rather than just the cost borne by the individual. The social benefits include increased productivity associated with the investment in education and a host of possible non-economic benefits such as lower crime, better health, more social cohesion and more informed and effective citizens. (*OECD 2008 education at a Glance, Glossary*)

Gini Index The Gini index measures the extent to which income distributions deviate from a perfectly equal distribution, between individuals or households within an economy. The Gini index measures the area between the Lorenz curve (a curve representing income distribution) and the hypothetical line of absolute equality. The Gini Index is expressed as a percentage of the maximum area under the line. A Gini index of zero represents perfect equality and 100, perfect inequality. (*Based on the OECD online Glossary*)

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Summarised form of Trow's forms and phases of higher education

	Elite	Mass	Universal
Proportion of cohort	0 - 15%	16 - 50%	Over 50%
Functions of HE	Shaping mind and character of upper class for elite roles	Transmission of skills, preparation for a broad range of elite roles inc. Technical/ economic roles	Adaptation of whole population to rapid social and technological change.
Attitude to access (amongst students)	A privilege of birth or talent	A right for all with minimum qualifications	An obligation for those from most 'typical' groups
Access and selection	Meritocratic based on school performance	Meritocratic plus compensatory programmes for equality of opportunity	Open access: emphasis on equality of achievement across classes, ethnicities

This table is reproduced in Trow (2005), drawing on John Brennan's (2004) work.

Appendix 2: Summary of graduation and entry rates

	<i>OECD average</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>UK</i>
<i>Entry rate</i>	<i>56%</i>	<i>67%</i>	<i>57%</i>
<i>Graduation rate</i>	<i>37%</i>	<i>43%</i>	<i>39%</i>

Appendix 3: Selection of subjects based on graduate earnings

To identify appropriate subjects for comparison and avoid building in a biased comparison, subjects were selected that offered a similar pattern of average returns in both countries, as measured by average graduate income soon after graduation. The table below demonstrates that in both Norway and England economics degrees are associated with higher than average pay and biology with lower than average pay.

Comparison of average graduate earnings by degree subject:

	Norway earnings (Kroner)	England earnings (Pounds)
Economics	32,110	17,316
Biology/Biological sciences	27,480	13,914
National average	30,370	15,009

Source for Norwegian data on graduate earnings:

NIFU STEP conducts a graduate survey, including questions on wages received by graduates 6 months after finishing their studies. The data for graduates working 6 months after graduation is available separated out by subject via the NIFUSTEP website. These figures are taken from the Kandidatundersøkelsen 2007, Halvtårsundersøkelsen, Table 11. Accessed on 10th November 2009 at:

http://www.nifustep.no/norsk/innhold/prosjekter/nasjonale/kandidatundersokelsen/halvtaarsundersokelser/kandidatundersokelsen_2007/kandidatundersokelsen_2007_resultater_pdf_til_nedlasting

Source for English Data on graduate earnings:

The Complete University Guide, an online resource of HE information, compiles tables of average earnings of recent graduates separated out by subject, derived from The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data. These figures are taken from HESA data for 2006/07, as reproduced on the Complete University Guide's website. Accessed on 10th November 2009 at: <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/single.htm?ipg=6371>

Appendix 4: London Discussion Guide

Discussion guide – Student's attitudes to their degree - Final London

Total length of discussion: 1 hour 15 mins

Questions to address:

- Are views on uni instrumental/intrinsic
- An individual good or public good
- Do students relate views to any of the three frames/narratives

NOTE: Questions in normal text, moderator notes/guidelines in caps bold text for headings etc.

Aim/topic	Questions/guide	Timing
Intro	<i>Thank you for taking part in this discussion. It will last between 45mins and 1 hour, and I hope you'll find it interesting. There are no right or wrong answers in any of the topics I'll be asking you about – you may all agree on some things, or disagree completely. That is fine. Please feel you can say what you think honestly and openly. I will be recording the discussion, but that recording will only be heard by me, and the record of the discussion (when I write it out) will be anonymous. If it's ok with you, we can start the discussion now, and at the end I can answer any questions on the research project.</i> START DIGITAL RECORDER.	
Names	To get started we can quickly go round and introduce ourselves: if you can tell me your name and where you're from?	5 mins
intro: Cartoon warm up. Top of mind ideas about HE decisions.	Today I want to find out what you think about getting a degree – what you think is important about that. Before we go into any detail I'd just like us to do a quick activity: PUT UP CARTOON and introduce scenario.	5 mins

	<p>Just shout out things you think they might be saying?</p> <p>How was that? Was it easy or difficult to know what to write? Did you need to know more about the people? e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What they want to study? How academic they are? Their background/family? 	
<p><i>Why get a degree?</i></p> <p><i>Investigate 'top of mind' opinions.</i></p> <p><i>Warm up</i></p>	<p>When did you decide to go to university/ start to think about it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have you always expected to? - What did you think about? What information did you get (if any)? <p>IF NOT COVERED IN WARM UP, PROBE HERE:</p> <p>Do you think those issues are typical for British students today?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does it make any difference what kind of subject you want to study? - Does it vary a lot for different people – does family or background matter? In what way? 	10 mins
<p><i>What kinds of benefits?</i></p> <p><i>See what benefits are 'top of mind'</i></p>	<p>The main thing I want to discuss with you is what you think the main benefits, or the main things you expect to get from your degree are?</p> <p>POST ITS</p> <p><i>"On these three Post its please make a quick note of the main benefits, or things you think you'll get from your degree"</i></p> <p><i>cluster by theme</i></p> <p>What will you get from it in the future?</p> <p>ALLOW THIS TO FOLLOW IT'S OWN COURSE, USING GENERAL PROBES SUCH AS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What other benefits might there be? - How will it help you/make it possible to reach your 	25 mins

<p><i>What kinds of knowledge/uses of knowledge</i></p>	<p>aims in life?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think that would apply to all subjects/courses or would it be different? <p><i>See what kinds of aims come up: are they purely educational/work related/personal</i></p> <p><i>If these haven't come up prompt for:</i></p> <p>While at uni:</p> <p><i>Intrinsic education</i></p> <p>What kinds of things do you think you will learn while you're here?</p> <p>What sorts of things are most important to learn?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (theory, practical knowledge, general skills, social skills) Why are those things more important? - How is it different to education at college/6th form? How is what you learn/how you learn different. - Do you think having a degree will help you learn more in the future? <p><i>Intrinsic/personal growth or experience</i></p> <p>What do you think you will get from the general experience of being here as a undergraduate?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New people? Where you live? Independence? - What's bad/not what you hoped for? <p>Do you think being at university/getting a degree will have an effect / change you in any ways?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In what way? How will that happen? Would that be different if you weren't studying but doing something else for these years? <p><i>After graduation:</i></p> <p><i>Thinking ahead to when you graduate</i> how do you think having a degree will have an impact on what you do later</p>	
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	<p>on?</p> <p>What do you think you will do after your degree?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work / further study/ Other/ Don't know – could you have done these things without a degree? <p>AGAIN IF NOT COMING UP ANYWAY, PROMPT FOR:</p> <p><i>Instrumental/career</i></p> <p><i>Whenever pay comes us</i></p> <p>HAND OUT EXCERSISE B – ASK THEM TO MAKE A QUICK NOTE OF WHAT IMPACT THEY THINK A DEGREE WILL MAKE ON PAY IN THE FUTURE. GATHER BACK IN SHEETS.</p> <p>How might having a degree effect what work you go on to do? Your career? In what ways? Why is that?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work options? Pay and conditions? Interesting/challenging work? Security? <p>What kinds of things about you degree do you think will be most important in getting a job?</p> <p>Knowledge of subject? Skills? Social skills? Values?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does it matter a lot what subject/where you studied/what grade you get? <p>Overall, How do you feel if you feel about the idea of finishing uni and looking for a job? Confident? Worried?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are you concerned about the economic situation <p><i>Instrumental/mobility</i></p> <p>Do you think your future working life will be very different from someone who has not got a degree?</p> <p>Would you have the same opportunities without a degree? What would be different?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What differences are there for non-graduates? - Do you think people's background affects if they go to university/ do a degree? Do you think it affects 	
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	what people get out of doing a degree?	
<i>Wrapping up benefits/advantages of a degree relative to not having one</i>	<p>To sum up, I'd like you to imagine a sort of best and worst case scenario, so first, imagine someone who has</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - has a degree similar to yours, and has really benefited from it and feel they made a really good decision in studying for a degree. - has a degree similar to yours, hasn't benefitted from it and regrets the decision to study for degree. - What would that be like? Describe their situation <p>NOTE DOWN, DO QUICKFIRE COMMENTS?</p>	
<i>Who benefits from your degree</i>	<p>IF HAVEN'T MENTIONED ANY BENEFITS FOR THOSE BEYOND THEMSELVES PROMT HERE:</p> <p>Other than the effects it will have on you, , does it matter to anyone else that you get a higher education?</p> <p>PROBE USING EXAMPLES FROM DISCUSSION SO FAR ON PAY/OPPORTUNITIES/KNOWLEDGE ETC.</p> <p>How might X benefit/advantage affect those around you? Who might be affected? In what ways?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - family? In what way? - Your community/Society in general? In what way? - Are some degrees more useful for others, and some only for individuals? In what ways? - Should people be encouraged to take courses that are more 'useful' to others? What might that mean? 	10 mins
<i>Who should pay for HE – who benefits?</i> <i>Individual/ Collective benefits and value</i> <i>Different kinds of benefits e.g.</i>	<p>One other thing I'm interested in talking to you about is how degrees should be paid for?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is it right you all receive some kind of loan? How do you feel about the loan? - Have you thought about how much there will be in total? Do you know how you will repay it/ how long 	15 mins

<p><i>financial, personal growth, educational, cultural, mobility and opportunity</i></p>	<p>it might take to repay it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about the way you pay for your degree? Is it fair? Do you think you pay about the right amount? Do you think you should pay less? Is it worth it? - If less: who should pay more? Why should the state/taxpayers pay? - Should costs vary by course? By where you study? <p>If it was free, would you have made the same choices?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If it was a lot more expensive would you have made the same choices? <p>IF SECTION ABOVE DIDN'T YIELD FULL DISCUSSION AGAIN ASK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who benefits from your degree? - You? – in what ways? - Society? The state? – in what ways? 	
<p><i>Wrapping up</i></p>	<p>We're pretty much done now, but is there anything you've thought of while we've been talking that you think we've missed/haven't had a chance to say, really disagreed with?</p> <p>Thanks and short explanation of how findings will be used/the projects aims.</p>	<p>5 mins</p>

Appendix 5: Oslo Discussion guide

Discussion guide – Student's attitudes to their degree - Final Oslo

Total length of discussion : 1 hour 15 mins

Questions to address:

- Are views on uni instrumental/intrinsic
- An individual good or public good
- Do students relate views to any of the three frames/narratives

NOTE: Questions in normal text, moderator notes/guidelines in caps bold text for headings etc.

Aim/topic	Questions/guide	Timing
Intro	<p><i>Thank you for taking part in this discussion. It will last between 45mins and 1 hour, and I hope you'll find it interesting. There are no right or wrong answers in any of the topics I'll be asking you about – you may all agree on some things, or disagree completely. That is fine. Please feel you can say what you think honestly and openly. I will be recording the discussion, but that recording will only be heard by me, and the record of the discussion (when I write it out) will be anonymous. If it's ok with you, we can start the discussion now, and at the end I can answer any questions on the research project.</i></p> <p><i>OSLO: Also, while I'll mostly be speaking English, if at any time you aren't understanding something, or find it hard to say what you think in English, please do feel you can use some Norwegian. My Norwegian classmate can help clarify if there's any confusion.</i></p> <p>START DIGITAL RECORDER.</p>	
Names	<p>To get started we can quickly go round and introduce ourselves: if you can tell me your name and where you're from?</p>	5 mins

<p>intro:</p> <p>Cartoon warm up.</p> <p>Top of mind ideas about HE decisions.</p>	<p>Today I want to find out what you think about getting a degree – what you think is important about that. Before we go into any detail I'd just like us to do a quick activity:</p> <p>PUT UP CARTOON and introduce scenario.</p> <p>Just shout out things you think they might be saying?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the pros and cons or benefits and downsides of going to uni to get a degree? <p>How was that? Was it easy or difficult to know what to write? Did you need to know more about the people? e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What they want to study? How academic they are? Their background/family? 	<p>5 mins</p>
<p>Why get a degree?</p> <p>Investigate 'top of mind' opinions.</p> <p>Warm up</p>	<p>When did you decide to go to university/ start to think about it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have you always expected to? - What did you think about? What information did you get (if any)? <p>IF NOT COVERED IN WARM UP, PROBE HERE:</p> <p>Do you think those issues are typical for British students today?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does it make any difference what kind of subject you want to study? - Does it vary a lot for different people – does family or background matter? In what way? 	<p>10 mins</p>
<p>What kinds of benefits?</p> <p>See what benefits are 'top of mind'</p>	<p>The main thing I want to discuss with you is what you think the main benefits, or the main things you expect to get from your degree are?</p> <p>POST ITS</p> <p><i>"On these three Post its please make a quick note of the main benefits, or things you think you'll get from your degree"</i></p>	<p>25 mins</p>

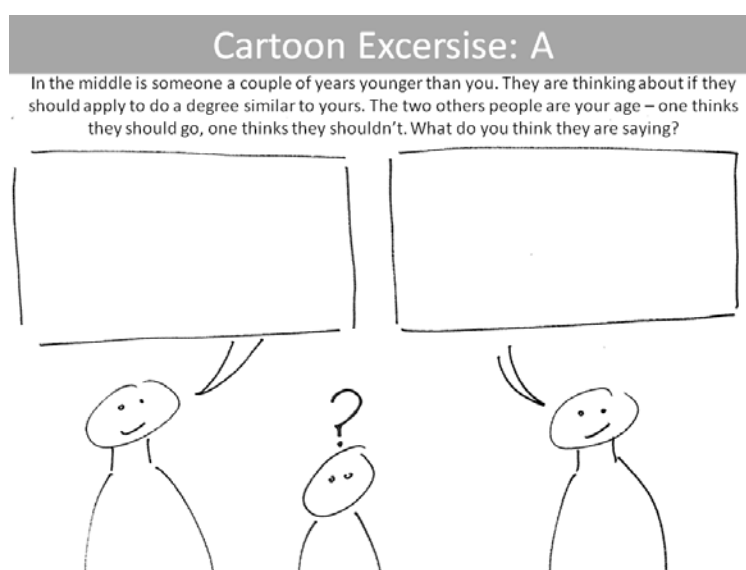
<p><i>What kinds of knowledge/uses of knowledge</i></p>	<p><i>cluster by theme</i></p> <p>What will you get from it in the future?</p> <p>ALLOW THIS TO FOLLOW IT'S OWN COURSE, USING GENERAL PROBES SUCH AS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What other benefits might there be? - How will it help you/why is this important? - Do you think that would apply to all subjects/courses or would it be different? <p><i>See what kinds of aims come up: are they purely educational/work related/personal</i></p> <p><i>If these haven't come up prompt for:</i></p> <p>While at uni:</p> <p><i>Intrinsic education</i></p> <p>What kinds of things do you think you will learn while you're here?</p> <p>What sorts of things are most important to learn?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (theory, practical knowledge, general skills, social skills) Why are those things more important? - How is it different to education at college/6th form? How is what you learn/how you learn different. - Do you think having a degree will help you learn more in the future? <p><i>Intrinsic/personal growth or experience</i></p> <p>What do you think you will get from the general experience of being here as a undergraduate?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New people? Where you live? Independence? - What's bad/not what you hoped for? <p>Do you think being at university/getting a degree will have an effect / change you in any ways?</p>	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In what way? How will that happen? - Is that something you could get through other experiences or is uni different? How? <p><i>After graduation:</i></p> <p><i>Thinking ahead to when you graduate</i> how do you think having a degree will have an impact on what you do later on?</p> <p>What do you think you will do after your degree?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work / further study/ Other/ Don't know – could you have done these things without a degree? <p>AGAIN IF NOT COMING UP ANYWAY, PROMPT FOR:</p> <p><i>Instrumental/career</i></p> <p><i>Whenever pay comes us</i></p> <p>HAND OUT EXCERSISE B – ASK THEM TO MAKE A QUICK NOTE OF WHAT IMPACT THEY THINK A DEGREE WILL MAKE ON PAY IN THE FUTURE. GATHER BACK IN SHEETS.</p> <p>How might having a degree effect what work you go on to do? Your career? In what ways? Why is that?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work options? Pay and conditions? Interesting/challenging work? Security? <p>What kinds of things about you degree do you think will be most important in getting a job?</p> <p>Knowledge of subject? Skills? Social skills? Values?</p> <p>Does it matter a lot what subject/where you studied/what grade you get?</p> <p>Overall, How do you feel if you feel about the idea of finishing uni and looking for a job? Confident? Worried?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are you concerned about the economic situation <p><i>Instrumental/mobility</i></p> <p>Do you think your future working life will be very different</p>	
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	<p>from someone who has not got a degree?</p> <p>Would you have the same opportunities without a degree? What would be different?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What differences are there for non-graduates? - Do you think people's background affects if they go to university/ do a degree? Do you think it affects what people get out of doing a degree? 	
<p><i>Wrapping up benefits/advantages of a degree relative to not having one</i></p>	<p>To sum up, I'd like you to imagine a sort of best and worst case scenario, so first, imagine someone who has</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - has a degree similar to yours, and has really benefited from it and feel they made a really good decision in studying for a degree. - has a degree similar to yours, hasn't benefitted from it and regrets the decision to study for degree. - What would that be like? Describe their situation <p>NOTE DOWN, DO QUICKFIRE COMMENTS?</p>	
<p><i>Who benefits from your degree</i></p>	<p>IF HAVEN'T MENTIONED ANY BENEFITS FOR THOSE BEYOND THEMSELVES PROMPT HERE:</p> <p>Other than the effects it will have on you, , does it matter to anyone else that you get a higher education?</p> <p>PROBE USING EXAMPLES FROM DISCUSSION SO FAR ON PAY/OPPORTUNITIES/KNOWLEDGE ETC.</p> <p>How might X benefit/advantage affect those around you? Who might be affected? In what ways?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - family? In what way? - Your community/Society in general? In what way? - Are some degrees more useful for others, and some only for individuals? In what ways? 	<p>10 mins</p>
<p><i>Who should pay for HE – who benefits?</i></p>	<p>One other thing I'm interested in talking to you about is how degrees should be paid for?</p>	<p>15 mins</p>

<p>Individual/ Collective benefits and value</p> <p>Different kinds of benefits e.g. financial, personal growth, educational, cultural, mobility and opportunity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is it right you all receive some kind of loan? How do you feel about the loan? - Have you thought about how much there will be in total? Do you know how you will repay it/ how long it might take to repay it? - What do you think about the way you pay for your degree? Is it fair? Do you think you pay about the right amount? Do you think you should pay less? Is it worth it? - If less: who should pay more? Why should the state/taxpayers pay? - Should costs vary by course? By where you study? <p>If it was free, would you have made the same choices?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If it was a lot more expensive would you have made the same choices? 	
<p>Wrapping up</p>	<p>We're pretty much done now, but is there anything you've thought of while we've been talking that you think we've missed/haven't had a chance to say, really disagreed with?</p> <p>Thanks and short explanation of how findings will be used/the projects aims.</p>	<p>5 mins</p>

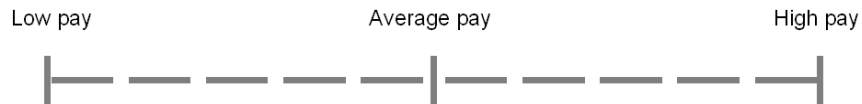
Appendix 6: Warm up/cartoon exercise



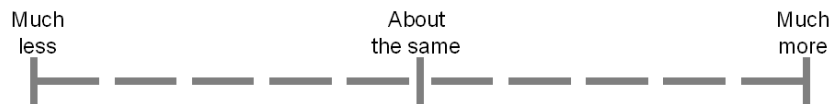
Appendix 7: Wage expectation task

Excercise B

For those with a degree similar to yours, what kind of salary will those who get a job receive in the first two years after graduation?



For those with a degree similar to yours, what kind of difference is there between their salary and those without a degree soon after graduation? Will it be ...



Appendix 8: Images of PO exercise: example: London Biology



And



Appendix 9: OECD countries IRRs

Full table of OECD countries showing private internal rates of return (IRR) for an individual obtaining a tertiary education, ISCED 5/6 (2004) (OECD 2008a, Table A10.2.)

IRR				
Country			Male	Female
Belgium	2004		11,3	14,0
Canada	2004		9,4	9,1
Czech Republic	2004		29,1	23,8
Denmark	2004		4,4	4,1
Finland	2004		10,7	9,3
France	2004		8,4	7,4
Germany	2004		8,0	4,8
Hungary	2004		19,8	13,8
Ireland	2004		10,2	11,8
Korea	2003		9,0	11,2
New Zealand	2004		8,6	11,9
Norway	2004		7,4	8,8
Poland	2004		22,8	18,6
Portugal	2004		23,9	21,5
Spain	2004		7,6	8,7
Sweden	2004		5,1	4,2
Switzerland	2004		10,3	10,2
United Kingdom	2004		14,3	14,5
United States	2004		11,0	8,4
All	2004		12,2	11,4

Appendix 10: Summary of results from pay-scale exercise

Question 2: Relative pay to non grads

QUESTION 2: For those with a degree similar to yours, what kind of difference is there between their salary and those without a degree soon after graduation? Will it be ...

